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IN EARLY MANHOOD

# JOHN SLIDELL

BY

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER  
GEORGE HOSMER SEARS

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“My motto has always been to accept an instalment of reform which may be obtained rather than struggle for something more perfect but unattainable for the moment.”

*From a letter of John Slidell to George Henry, Esq., June 11, 1860, in the Autograph Collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, (Bequest of Arthur G. Coffin).*

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: EARLY YEARS	5
CHAPTER II: IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	24
CHAPTER III: THE MISSION TO MEXICO	48
CHAPTER IV: PROGRESS	74
CHAPTER V: IN THE SENATE 1853 TO 1857	103
CHAPTER VI: THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE	138
CHAPTER VII: SECESSION	169
CHAPTER VIII: AT THE COURT OF NAPOLEON III	186
CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION AND RETROSPECTION	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY	241
INDEX	243

## PORTRAITS OF SLIDELL

IN EARLY MANHOOD	frontispiece
WHEN HE ENTERED POLITICS	facing 24
IN MORE MATURE YEARS	facing 186





## INTRODUCTION

IT is said of Thiers that he aspired to but one line in world history. A witty reviewer congratulates him that in Wells' *Outline* he has failed of even that. The case of John Slidell in American history seems to offer a parallel. He has made the line. Few, one may venture to say, are ignorant of his part in the Trent Affair. As a name, he lives, but as little more than that. It is among the ironies of American history that one of its chief makers during a most critical period should have sunk so completely into oblivion. Few men of his importance in the ante-bellum South but have their biography. Toombs and Cobb, Yancey and Mason, Wise and Hunter, Walker and Benjamin, Stephens and Rhett,<sup>1</sup> not to mention Davis and the military heroes of the Confederacy, each has his "Life," short or long as the materials have been available. Almost alone of the men who really determined the course and fate of Secession Slidell remains neglected.

Apparently it was his own wish. No body of Slidell papers as such is known to exist. The late Charles Francis Adams is quoted for the state-

<sup>1</sup> His biography by Dr. Laura A. White of the University of Wyoming is still in manuscript.

ment that Slidell destroyed as far as possible the records out of which his biography might have been constructed.<sup>2</sup> And now, more than one hundred and thirty years after his birth, in the absence of personal materials, it is impossible to relate the events of his youth, even of his younger manhood, save only in the most perfunctory manner. His riper years as well would have been obscured by the mists of time had it not been that from about 1840 until the close of the Civil War he was a national figure. As such he has a part in the public records which no act or wish of his own could altogether obliterate, though even here a biographer would welcome more of the personal touch, best revealed in familiar correspondence. It is, therefore, a source of extreme congratulation that two collections of Slidell letters do actually supplement the Congressional Records. One is a series of approximately one hundred and fifty letters written by Slidell to his close personal and political friend, James Buchanan, in the years between 1844 and 1861. The other is a series of about an equal number directed to his diplomatic co-worker, James M. Mason, who represented the Confederacy at London as did Slidell at Paris.

It is now more than ten years since the present writer became interested in Slidell. An investigation of Slidell's mission to Mexico aroused his curiosity concerning a figure so able yet so elusive.

<sup>2</sup> Made in conversation with Professor William E. Dodd.

But at that time the Mason papers were not yet available, and the rich possibilities in the Buchanan papers did not occur to him. Subsequent utilization of both these collections and the stimulus of a most friendly correspondence with Mr. Alfred Slidell, until the latter's death in 1920, and more recently with his sister, Marie Rosine Slidell, Comtesse de St. Roman, re-awakened in the author the determination to outline as best he might the career of Slidell. Accordingly, the work which follows is presented with regret for the brief treatment of the early years and the closing ones, but with confidence that, incomplete though it be, any treatment of Slidell should prove a welcome supplement to the record of the Old South and of Secession.

I desire to acknowledge my indebtedness to the editors of *The American Historical Review*, and *The South Atlantic Quarterly* for permission to reproduce material appearing originally under their auspices. The chapter on *Slidell's Mission to Mexico* is essentially the same as that in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* for January, 1913. The correspondence of Slidell and Buchanan, constituting an article in *The American Historical Review* for July, 1922, is here distributed through three chapters. *A Confederate Diplomat at the Court of Napoleon III* is only slightly altered from the original as it appeared in *The American Historical Review* for January, 1921. I desire

also to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor William T. Laprade of Duke University for the friendly care which he has shown in guiding the manuscript through the press.

To Madame la Comtesse de St. Roman, formerly Marie Rosine Slidell, this work owes much. Her kindness in furnishing data concerning the more domestic life of her father has been unfailing. In her correspondence with the author she has preserved the literary tradition so evident in the letters of her father, whose pen was indeed facile. I am indebted to her also for the two portraits of her father in his earlier years. The Century Company have kindly permitted me to reproduce the more mature portrait from Nicolay and Hay's *Life of Abraham Lincoln*.

It is regretted that the present study went to press too early to take advantage of the recent contribution of Professor E. D. Adams in his *Great Britain and the American Civil War* to our knowledge of the Civil War. The allusions to Slidell in John Bigelow's *Retrospections of An Active Life* might with propriety have received more detailed notice. But it was decided to relate Slidell's Parisian efforts in his own language rather than in that of his detractors. The same observation might be made of Bigelow's *France and the Confederate Navy*.



## CHAPTER I

### EARLY YEARS

THE date of Slidell's birth is not a matter of complete certainty; it is commonly given as 1793, in the city of New York. The family was well situated, Slidell's father being one of the wealthier merchants of his time, and Slidell lacked none of the advantages of education and rearing. If no other evidence for this were in existence, proof would appear in surviving specimens of Slidell's correspondence, for self-made men, however skilful in their craftsmanship, are betrayed by their pens into crudities of expression of which their brethren who owe somewhat to God and family are seldom guilty. The condition of the family is not left entirely to conjecture, however, for it appears that when Lieutenant Matthew C. Perry, afterward Commodore Perry of Japanese fame, married in 1814 the younger sister of Slidell, the bride's father was in position to place his son-in-law in command of a ship bound for Holland, a furlough for which was refused at the navy department on the ground of an impending war with Algiers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Elliot Griffis. *Matthew Calbraith Perry*, p. 47.

The wedding of his sister Jane affords one more clew to the home environment of John. It was solemnized at the family residence by the Reverend Nathaniel Bowen, afterwards Bishop, according to the ritual of the Episcopal Church,<sup>2</sup> and thus almost completely sets at rest the accusation at one time levelled against Slidell that he, like his friend Judah P. Benjamin, was of Jewish origin.<sup>3</sup> This same marriage was later to prove of political significance to Slidell and to the country because of the four sons and six daughters born of the union; Caroline, in particular, through her marriage with August Belmont, was to become a great figure in society and her husband one of the mainsprings of John's political machine.<sup>4</sup>

Of Slidell's youth the additional fact is recorded, quite unadorned, that he graduated from Columbia College in 1810 at the early, but for those times not astonishing, age of seventeen. May one infer that the son of a merchant prince, in times when commerce was tied in port—for Slidell must presumably have been a sophomore in 1808, the disastrous year of embargo—was in the nature of things a Federalist and an opponent of Jefferson and all his works? To do so would

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. The bride's father was a vestryman of Grace Episcopal Church in New York City at the time of its incorporation in 1809.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin*, p. 165, quoting from the New Orleans *Daily True Delta*.

<sup>4</sup> Griffis, *Matthew Calbraith Perry*, p. 431.

be to place a severe strain upon historical license. The philosophy of Slidell's maturer years was so unqualifiedly Jeffersonian that his conversion, if one prefers to accept that hypothesis, must have been more startling than that of John Quincy Adams, whose defection from the Federalists may possibly have been known to the young gentlemen of Columbia, on the supposition, that is, that they were more alert to current events than are their successors, the collegians of to-day. Besides, it might be misleading to draw such an inference in view of the fact that many merchants of the type of the elder Slidell took a sufficiently broad view of politics and world events to commend the administration on patriotic grounds for what was impoverishing them personally. This was unquestionably true of Gray, of Salem, the greatest shipmaster of the time, and may, conjecturably, have been true of Slidell as well. Certainly John Slidell was coming to an age of political self-consciousness at a time when the Virginia dynasty controlled the presidency and the Clintons controlled New York, and, whether he was or was not a Republican, he was in a position to hear preached the true milk of the word.

The years following the War of 1812 witnessed an extraordinary migration toward the western country. State after state applied for admission to the Union, and America entered upon a career of wheat and cotton production whereby she was

soon to feed and clothe the world. Young men in particular, still free lances and foot-loose, saw their way to fortune as pioneers in new lands. The characteristic direction for New Englanders and New Yorkers was to move due westward through northern Ohio, southern Michigan, and, in the 1830's, into northern Illinois and from there north and northwest into Wisconsin and Minnesota. For men of the border slave states, Maryland and Virginia, the course lay southwestward towards Tennessee and the Gulf, while for the South Atlantic states, as for New York, the path of empire was due westward. Slidell, therefore, was scarcely following the usual trail when, in 1819, his father having meanwhile failed in business and his own plans for a diplomatic career having been thereby frustrated,<sup>5</sup> instead of accompanying others of his stock and section into the Northwest, he chose New Orleans for his goal. But, having made his bed, he lay in it, and from his settlement there until the advent of Secession he had what one might call the ardor of the convert. No one could have been more loyally Southern. The motto *Ubi bene ibi patria* has seldom found a more conscientious exponent. In Louisiana Slidell prospered, and to her he gave of his best.

<sup>5</sup> Letter of Madame la Comtesse de St. Roman to the author, August 31, 1922.



For life in a commercial city like New Orleans Slidell was peculiarly equipped, having served, following his graduation at Columbia, an apprenticeship in commerce, presumably with his father. In addition he studied law. The combination was effective, for it was in maritime law that he was to make his name at the bar. The Code Napoléon, which constituted Louisiana's substitute for the common law of other states, may have required some further time to master, but even so, Slidell was practicing before the bar of the State Supreme Court as early as the March term of 1827, when he won a case on the question of appointing a curator in an estate upon which his client had a lien.<sup>6</sup> From this time on Slidell's appearances before the court were frequent, though the number of his defeats in early sessions indicates, perhaps, that, as a young lawyer new to the country, some of his early commissions were for lost causes of which his championship was *pro forma*.

An interesting case in which Slidell appeared for the plaintiff and lost involved the question of marine insurance. A ship sailing between New Orleans and Hamburg, in order to avoid the dangers of a lee shore, was obliged to carry a heavy press of sail. The danger having been averted, immediately on arrival in port the captain discovered that the vessel leaked badly from strains

<sup>6</sup> Louisiana Reports, Book 4. 5 Martin's Reports, (N. S.) 505.

induced by the excessive canvas. Slidell in this case demonstrated that "by the *lex mercatoria* of the continent of Europe, such an injury as this furnishes a claim for general average." That is to say, the cargo may be assessed for a portion of the costs. For this he cited numerous authorities. Marine insurance provides for such casualties. And the plaintiff sued for \$770 from the insuring company. The court, however, was of the opinion that the insurance contract was a Louisiana instrument, subject to United States and Louisiana law, which was the reverse of European law in this respect. "With us, all casual and inevitable damage and loss, as distinguished from that which is purposely incurred, is a subject of particular, not general average." The principle was of sufficient interest, however, to elicit from the court an elaborate defence of its position. The attorney for the defendant, who carried off the honors of victory, was Eustis, an interesting association of names, suggestive in 1861 of the Confederate commissioner and his secretary.<sup>7</sup>

In this same year of 1828, Slidell effected the union between law and politics which in America is so characteristic. He struck boldly out for a seat in Congress, taking the stump for Jackson as well as for himself. Jackson carried the nation;

<sup>7</sup> Louisiana Reports, Book 5. 6 Martin's Reports (N. S.) 629-634. *Shiff v. Louisiana State Insurance Company*, April 1828.

not so Slidell his constituency. But defeat brought its own victory, for Jackson appointed him in 1829 to be United States district attorney at New Orleans, a recognition which attached Slidell to the General and his cause. He resigned the office, however, after about one year's tenure.

Slidell, who was later to be so great a figure in the Democratic party, did not long retain the good will of its earlier leaders. Neither Van Buren nor Jackson felt much confidence in the rising leader from Louisiana. Thus, in August, 1833, Van Buren informed the President that Slidell was at Saratoga, with him, "under very considerable excitement, but preferring to behave well," over his removal from Federal office. Van Buren had informed him that an acknowledgment of injustice to him by the President was out of the question and that revenge upon the new incumbent must not be contemplated. Van Buren mollified him by suggestions of other appointments, assuring him that in his opinion Jackson was not prejudiced against him. But he warned Slidell that any attempt to play politics against Jackson in Louisiana would weigh not a feather in the President's decision. Slidell seems then rather to have hedged, boasting that his business in New Orleans was worth \$10,000 a year (1833) and that nothing could induce him to abandon it for office under the government, "but that he would not conceal from me, that the offer of any place of sufficient re-

spectability to wipe away the effect of what had been done,—such as a *Chargés*, would be very grateful to his feelings.”<sup>8</sup>

That the party chieftains at this period weighed Slidell and found him wanting would appear also from a letter of Jackson to Van Buren in which Jackson accepts the views of Slidell’s enemies in New Orleans and scouts the trustworthiness of Slidell’s recommendations on patronage. “Mr. Gordon [collector of New Orleans] is now here. From testimonials submitted mr. Slidel has imposed upon the Secretary of the Treasury and myself in his recommendation of an appraiser for the Port of N. Orleans—the man had been suspended as an inspector for intemperence twice and then permitted to resign. This is charged to be in the knowledge of mr. Slidel—it is stated further by mr. Gordon that Slidel, Nicholson and Grimes are all calhoun men and nullifiers. Therefore it is that they are in favor of Genl. Overton, and he asserts that they all three are your and my bitter opposers at all their elections. Gordon says the friends of the administration will send Mr. Walker to the Senate, that Genl. Overton cannot be elected.” Lest the foregoing should not have been sufficiently clear to so astute a politician as Van Buren, the President goes on to make the warning more specific. “Knowing that you had a favor-

<sup>8</sup> Van Buren MSS., Library of Congress. Van Buren to Jackson, Saratoga Springs, Aug. 6, 1833.

able opinion of Mr. Slidel as well as myself this letter is written to put you on your guard of this man, that you may not break your shins over stools not in your way, and that you may be guarded in any communications you may happen to make with him."<sup>9</sup> If Slidell had any hint of this attitude toward him at Washington, it did not deter him in 1834 from presenting himself as a candidate for the United States senate. Louisiana, however, thought otherwise. In analyzing the causes of his defeat, Slidell may have assigned the responsibility to his divided interests. At any rate, he disposed in the following year of much of his law practice and devoted himself less interruptedly to politics.

In 1835, at the age of forty-two, Slidell further cemented his ties with Louisiana by a marriage into one of the proud French creole families of the state.<sup>10</sup> Mathilde Deslonde, the future Mrs. Slidell, had first come into relation with her husband's family when, as a young girl sent away to school in New York, she formed a friendship for her school-mate, a younger sister of Slidell. I

<sup>9</sup> Van Buren MSS., Library of Congress. Jackson to Van Buren, Washington, Nov. 19, 1833. For both of the preceding letters I am indebted to Professor John Spencer Bassett of Smith College.

<sup>10</sup> After the battle of New Orleans, the bride's mother had been selected to crown General Jackson with laurel leaves. On this occasion she met her future husband—a member of the General's staff—who had brought his slaves to aid in making the ramparts of cotton bales. Mme. la Comtesse de St. Roman to the author, March 27, 1925.

quote from the words of her daughter. "My mother was profoundly religious, austere towards herself, indulgent to others.

"Note that she was a Catholic, being a full blooded French woman as to race, a creole, sent to New York at the age of fifteen to learn English at the celebrated school kept by Madame Chégaray, where she met precisely Julia Slidell, her future husband's youngest sister, come there to acquire the French language."

One may conjecture that the girlhood friendship thus begun led to visits of each to the home of the other, and thus, in a most natural way, to the union which resulted. That it was happy, even beyond most, is apparent from the recollections of the children. Speaking of her father, the Comtesse de St. Roman remarks that "Impassioned, violent in politics, at home he was the gentlest of the gentle, utterly unselfish, tenderness itself to my mother, to us children. He was about of the same age as his mother-in-law, and he was all their lives through, as it were, the most affectionate of brothers towards her, and yet the most respectful of sons. On her side her tact was so genuine, so delicate, that she was both maternal and fraternal in her manner towards him."

Mrs. Slidell found time to be a careful mother and yet to shine socially. Painting, also, in which she was proficient, she did not neglect, and the plantation house at Belle-Point, on the banks of



the Mississippi near New Orleans, was enriched by her brush. A fine portrait of her by Healy is in the possession of her daughter at Paris, the costuming and background having been determined by the sitter. Commodore Perry, on his return from Japan, had brought for Mrs. Slidell an immense China vase, a cashmere shawl from India, and "the very first arum that had ever been seen in Washington." Grouping these gifts about herself, "in her wardrobe she chose a black velvet ball dress, the bodice with basque trimmed around the shoulders and the hips with Marabout feathers of their natural tint and a garland of red velvet geraniums."<sup>11</sup>

In 1836 Slidell again tried for the senate, only to be again defeated. Consolation might be gleaned, however, from the circumstance that Slidell controlled the Democracy, his successful opponent having carried off the honors by votes obtained from the enemy. Slidell's account, as rendered to Van Buren, indicates also a new cordiality toward the national chieftains.

My dear Sir,

As I am desirous that you and our political friends may not misapprehend the nature of the contest between Mr. Morton and myself at the late senatorial election, I send you herewith a number of the Bee of this day, which gives a fair statement of it. The Bee is the State paper and the leading journal of our party in this state,—of the

<sup>11</sup> Madame la Comtesse de St. Roman to the author. Feb. 17, 1922.



28 votes given to me, 21 were those of our own party, 7 of the opposition—Mr. Morton on the first ballot had 13 votes from our political friends and 18 of the opposition. I assure you that among the motives of regret for my disappointment, that of not having the pleasure of seeing you on the 4th of March is not the least prominent.

I am very respectfully and truly,

Your friend and servant,

John Slidell.

To Honl. Martin Van Buren.<sup>12</sup>

A subsequent letter to Van Buren throws light upon Slidell's position in the party in 1839 and also upon his relations with the Gordons, a family once able to compromise Slidell in the esteem of Jackson but now themselves discredited.

New Orleans, 20 April, 1839.

Dear Sir,

The office of Collector of the Customs for the District of Mississippi, being about to be vacated by the resignation of Mr. Breedlove, the importance of the appointment which you will be called upon to make emboldens me to make some suggestions respecting the nomination of his successor. There will doubtless be many applicants for the situation but from the peculiar qualifications which it requires, the range of choice will necessarily be limited. The merchants of this place, with but very rare exceptions, are opposed to your administration, and among the few who support it, I know not one who can be considered as in any way qualified for the place. In these days of defalcation, no man should be selected who has been extensively engaged in speculation or business of any kind or who is in the least degree embarrassed in his pecuniary affairs. He should be a firm supporter of our political

<sup>12</sup> Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. Slidell to Van Buren, January 1837.

faith, a man of talents, experience and business habits and above all a man of unimpeachable integrity.

All these qualities are to be found united in an eminent degree in Mr. Denis Prieur. This gentleman was for many years by successive re-elections mayor of our city and enjoys I believe a higher degree of popularity than any other individual in Louisiana. He is now absent on a very important mission to Europe from our municipal authorities (the negotiation of an extensive loan) but he will in all probability return before the appointment of his successor will become necessary, as Mr. Breedlove's resignation is not to take effect until the 30 June. Should Mr. Prieur not return in time or should he not from any other cause be appointed, I would beg leave to suggest Mr. H. B. Trist,<sup>13</sup> as a popular person to fill the vacancy. Mr. Trist is a man of superior talents, educated for the bar, possessing a moderate fortune and perfectly unembarrassed. he has a very strong family connection who with himself have ever been strenuous supporters of democratic principles. He was appointed several years since by General Jackson, Surveyor General of the Public Lands in this district, but resigned the situation on being made cashier of the bank at Donaldsonville, which place he now holds. He will, on the contingency of Mr. Prieur not being appointed, be strenuously recommended by many of your most influential friends in this state.

I have as yet heard of no other person whose name will probably be presented to you with the exception of that of Mr. Martin Gordon Junior. I hope that you will do me the justice to believe that what I am about to say is not dictated by any vindictive feeling growing out of an old feud with his father. My relations with the son have ever been those of friendly intercourse and personally I have no reproach to make against him, but I feel that so much evil might result from an injudicious appointment as to make it an imperative duty to give you correct infor-

<sup>13</sup> Mr. H. B. Trist was a brother of Nicholas P. Trist, negotiator of the Mexican Treaty of 1848.

mation respecting the applicant. The Gordons, father and son, supported at the last election in this state, the Whig candidates for governor and Congress, Messrs. Roman and White. Mr. Prieur was as you may recollect our candidate for governor, being defeated by a very small majority. The Gordons are now opposed to your administration, whatever it may suit their present views to say to the contrary. Mr. Gordon Junior was until very recently cashier of the Union Bank of Louisiana with a salary of eight thousand dollars. this situation he was called upon to resign by an unanimous vote of the direction, in consequence of a deficiency of fifty thousand dollars, which he alleged to have sent to the different branches of the bank. The sum was made good by him by giving notes at long terms endorsed by his father. I speak advisedly when I say that the impression of the direction is that the money was never sent to the branches, but was made use of by Mr. Gordon for his own purposes, doubtless with the intention of eventually replacing it. The embarrassments which led to this unfortunate step still continue and were there no other objection, I consider this an insuperable one. The money of the public would not be in safe hands. Believe me with the highest consideration and respect,

Your devoted friend and servant,

John Slidell.

To His Excellency Martin Van Buren.<sup>14</sup>

Slidell's regard for Van Buren survived the President's defeat, for in March, 1842, on learning of Van Buren's intention to visit the Hermitage, he invited him to stop at New Orleans on his way up the river, submitting a reception program to Van Buren's consideration. "Your friends here of course wish to receive you in the manner

<sup>14</sup> Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. Slidell to Van Buren, New Orleans, April 20, 1839.

that may be most agreeable to yourself and wish to be governed entirely by your views in relation to any arrangements to be made for your reception. Many of them are anxious to make some public party demonstration but they will change the idea, if it be considered indiscreet to do so under existing circumstances. A few lines explanatory of your views and wishes will enable us to act understandingly. When the proper moment arrives you will be brought forward with *entire unanimity* by the democratic party of Louisiana as their candidate. I write in great haste, as I have only heard today from any authentic source of your intended visit. I regretted extremely that my limited sojourn at the North on my way to Europe, deprived me of the opportunity of seeing you."<sup>15</sup>

His correspondence with Van Buren reveals Slidell as a power in local politics, frequently defeated but ever tenacious. But his influence was still local. His views were proffered to national leaders but chiefly upon local conditions and appointments. Real progress toward national position is, however, apparent in the friendship which seems to have conquered the prejudice of Van Buren, and, it may be, of Jackson also.

Near the end of Slidell's career in this private, or, at any rate, only semi-public life occurred an

<sup>15</sup> Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. Slidell to Van Buren, New Orleans, March 10, 1842.

incident in which he must have felt the profoundest interest, namely the court-martial, on a charge of murder, of his younger brother, Alexander Slidell, who had added an uncle's name of Mackenzie and ranked as a commander in the United States navy. Alexander was perhaps seven years younger than John Slidell. But he, too, had made a name for himself. He was favorably known as the author of lives of John Paul Jones and Oliver Hazard Perry, and his dignity of bearing, both at the trial and subsequently, commanded the respect of thoughtful men. The case which brought him to such a pass is one of the most painful in American naval annals. In September, 1842, Mackenzie was sent on the Brig *Somers*, twelve officers and 108 men, with dispatches for the African coast. It was his misfortune that one of the twelve officers, a son of Tyler's Secretary of War, was Midshipman Philip Spencer, whose naval record was already very bad. Early on the return voyage, which began November 11, Mackenzie was informed, as fate would have it, by his brother John's brother-in-law, Adrien Deslonde, of Spencer's machinations to seduce the crew, murder the officers, and raise the black flag. The story which follows is in the words of Adrien Deslonde's niece, the Comtesse de St. Roman:

Do you know of the tragedy of the *Somers*, the man of war commanded by my father's own brother, whom you

probably do not recognize as such under the name of *Mac-Kenzie*. The Mackenzie clan was a royal family as it were, like all Scotch clans, and my ancestor who fled to the wilds of North America to save his head from the block at the defeat of the last Pretender, was a member of it, son of a younger son. The title of the chieftain is the Earl of Cromartie. The Mackenzies dying out in New York in the person of a bachelor uncle, this one induced *mine*, Alexander Slidell, to become Alexander Mackenzie. He commanded the fleet in the Mediterranean and we have a superb portrait of him painted by the celebrated Goya.

He sought the head of his family and was received with open arms by Lord Cromartie, and kept in the old castle as long as his leave allowed. We had a packet of letters written from Cromartie Castle.

This is only a preface to a terrible tragedy. Uncle Alexander had on board of the *Somers*, fortunately, a midshipman, descended from French officers of the Royal Navy, my mother's brother Adrien Deslonde, and *unfortunately* the son of the Secretary of War, whose name was Spencer, if my memory does not betray me. This youth's head was completely turned, poisoned as it were, by the literary rage both in prose and verse, for corsairs, for pirates: witness Byron, the Red Rover, et cetera. He worked hard in secret amongst the crew, of which however a feeble majority remained still faithful although inclining to waver. Adrien Deslonde's remonstrances remaining useless, at the peril of his own life, he disclosed the plot to my uncle. He at once called a court martial, on the case of the ringleader, son though he was of the Secretary of War. The verdict was unanimous, and execution immediate. I am not sure enough of my memory as to the fate of the other culprits. The position was a cruel one in the days of sails, but at last the Commander of the *Somers* could reach the United States and present himself to be courtmartialed. He was acquitted by a unanimous verdict, but the strain was too great for his heart, and before long, he fell dead from his horse.



His widow, belonging to an important family, the Robinsons, never took off her cap, which remains present to my childish memory as the first of its kind I had ever seen. The last was on the head of my so witty Aunt Jane Slidell, wife of Commodore Calbraith Perry, he of Japan fame.

The trial which is thus so vividly described after more than three fourths of a century by the niece of the central figure, created an immense national sensation at the time. Men like Richard Henry Dana and Charles Sumner felt it necessary to enlighten public opinion concerning the critical plight of a small body of officers on a brig of the *Somers'* construction in the face of a mutinous crew. Dana expanded also on the malicious character of Spencer and the manner in which he had been previously shielded by higher officers for the very grossest breaches of discipline out of deference to the influence of his father. Sumner, in addition to articles for purely Boston consumption, also reached the nation through the *North American Review*.<sup>16</sup> For this high service Mackenzie was deeply grateful. And in a letter, to be opened only after his death, which occurred in 1848, he left a message of affection for his friend. It is a circumstance not without interest that the Slidells should thus first have encountered Charles Sumner in the capacity of friend and protector.

Deplorable though one must the dearth of material concerning these earlier years of Slidell, it is

<sup>16</sup> Vol. 52, p. 512.



nevertheless apparent that out of New York had come a young man of good family and prospects to select New Orleans as the field for his best efforts, and that between 1819 and 1840 he had won a name for himself as a lawyer of the first rank and as a politician of probably the third, for as yet he was not master in his own state, and his relations with the party leaders at Washington were equivocal. Marriage, which had come to him later than to many, had proved singularly felicitous. He was a happy man, and in many ways successful, with foundations laid for greater success to come. Beyond New Orleans, however, save among old family connections in New York and Rhode Island, it is not likely that he was known. National recognition still lay ahead.

## CHAPTER II

### IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES 1843 TO 1845

SLIDELL'S first venture upon the national scene was as a representative from Louisiana in the Twenty-eighth Congress in the troubled days of President Tyler's war with the Whigs. The impression which Slidell was to make upon legislation, both in his term as representative and subsequently as senator, was that of a keen and acute thinker and man of affairs rather than that of an orator. His was the rôle of a modern congressman in a day when business is a matter of committees. He was in no sense a candidate for the honors which Clay and Webster and Calhoun had long worn with distinction. To follow Slidell through his congressional career is, therefore, a somewhat pedestrian undertaking, and many of its details may be safely omitted as matters of routine which fall to the lot of any representative of the people. He was the natural spokesman for petitions from his district, so that pension claims, adjustment of land titles, petitions for light houses near New Orleans, for improve-



WHEN HE ENTERED POLITICS



ments of postal service between Washington and New Orleans, for regulation of the mint, and for the location or strengthening of government forts in the New Orleans district all came within his natural purview.

Out of this mass of legislative detail, one or two items stand forth with special distinctness. One of these is a bill to exempt from duty cotton imported into the United States from Texas,<sup>1</sup> indicating on Slidell's part an interest in Texan affairs which made him available soon afterward for his first experience in diplomacy, the mission to Mexico. Another was the linking of his name with that of Andrew Jackson through a resolution, most appropriate in a member from New Orleans, to remit the fine of \$1,000 levied against Jackson by Judge Hall in 1815. In what amounted to his maiden speech in Congress Slidell vindicated Jackson for enforcing martial law and condemned Judge Hall for his severity, reminding his hearers incidentally that the judge was an Englishman. That Whig opponents discovered in this maneuver only the machinations of political bankrupts seeking the aid of General Jackson's name is perhaps only testimony to its adroitness.<sup>2</sup> There is a kind of rugged simplicity, moreover, in Slidell's refusal to adorn a popular theme with the lan-

<sup>1</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session, p. 77, Dec. 28, 1843.

<sup>2</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session, p. 96, Jan. 2, 1844.

guage of oratory. "But I have the honor to represent the district which comprises within its limits the plains of Chalmette—the battle ground of the 8th January, 1815, the scene of the most glorious victory that adorns our national annals. This circumstance and the peculiar position which I and my colleagues from Louisiana occupy in relation to this question imperatively call upon us for some expression of our feelings—something more than the mere recording of our silent vote in favor of its passage."<sup>3</sup> In this connection Slidell goes so far as to claim that the people's demand for justice to Andrew Jackson is chiefly responsible for the sending of a Democratic delegation to Congress, "men who would discharge that trust with zeal as well as fidelity."<sup>4</sup>

This effort won for its maker an entry in the diary of John Quincy Adams to the effect that "Slidell made an hours speech for the bill, but the passion to pass it was so red-hot that it [the House] had not patience to hear him."<sup>5</sup> From Van Buren it elicited a note of cordial appreciation, written, no doubt, with the more sincerity because Van Buren had learned from other sources of Slidell's enthusiasm at this period for his nomination at the forthcoming convention in

<sup>3</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session. Appendix, p. 32, Dec. 29, 1843.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, XI. 465.

Baltimore.<sup>6</sup> In his reply Slidell seized the opportunity to encourage yet at the same time to caution Van Buren, thereby raising the issues on which the two were soon to part company. Van Buren, he wrote, had reason for satisfaction at the present posture of affairs. He continued:

My observation here has only served to strengthen my conviction that in every state in the Union, with the single exception of South Carolina, the great mass of the Democratic party look upon you not only as the fittest but the strongest candidate whom they can bring forward. Mr. Calhoun's friends by their earnestness and clamor appeared to present a strength, which in reality they did not possess, but it would be a fatal mistake to suppose that we can dispense with their aid in the approaching contest. They must be conciliated, they only require certain concessions to act with us zealously and efficiently. They have taken a position which their pride and as I believe their honest convictions will compel them to adhere to, and their neutrality would be as fatal to us as their opposition. They require an adjustment of the tariff on revenue principles and the adherence to the 21st rule, in substance if not in form.

When I speak of the tariff, I of course only refer to the action of the House of Representatives, for the composition of the Senate gives us no hope of any practical decision of that great question by the present Congress.

Offsetting this encouragement is a warning to Van Buren against certain associates of his in New York, Messrs. Beardsley and Davis, whose spokesmanship for the candidate was misunderstood in many quarters. Very delicate, also, is the

<sup>6</sup> Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. George H. Martin to Van Buren, Philadelphia, Dec. 11, 1843.



question as to the right of petition to Congress. "There may be districts at the north in which the question of the right of petition (falsely so called) has assumed such an aspect that the democratic representative is perhaps bound to respect the popular prejudice, but I am sure that there are many others in which no such prejudice exists, let them act with us. Our Southern friends all say that they cannot face their constituents if, in a Congress where we count nearly two to one, we should repeal a rule adopted by a Whig House."<sup>7</sup> This perfectly friendly and even cordial letter explains the termination of any Van Buren-Slidell alliance. Van Buren was to identify himself more and more with the northern viewpoint, Slidell with the southern.

Two of Slidell's personal interests entered into his legislative activity in the early months of 1844. As a highly successful man of the law and a natural individualist and states' rights advocate, Slidell must have offered with positive fervor his resolution of March 25, 1844, "That the Committee on the Judiciary be directed to enquire into the expediency of amending existing laws, so as to adopt, in the courts of the United States in Louisiana, the mode of proceeding in the courts of said State in civil cases excepting those of admiralty jurisdiction; and the said committee be

<sup>7</sup> Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress. Slidell to Van Buren. Washington, Feb. 2, 1844.

further directed to enquire into the expediency of repealing so much of the twelfth section of the judiciary act of 24th September, 1789, as gives to the circuit court of the United States jurisdiction of all civil suits at common law, or in equity, when an alien is a party, or the suit is between a citizen of another state, and that they do report by the bill or otherwise.”<sup>8</sup> A second and equally abiding interest of Slidell’s was his identification with railroad construction in Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Southwest. Like Stephen A. Douglas, with whom he sympathized in so little else, Slidell was a railroad builder. This phase of his varied outlook received possibly a slight but certainly a significant expression in his presentation of a petition of the Mexican Gulf railroad company for remission of duties on iron, an indirect but not the less valuable type of government subsidy.<sup>9</sup>

To Slidell as a member for Louisiana fell the making of arrangements whereby Congress should honor the funeral of his colleague, the Honorable P. E. Bossier, who died in office. In his words of eulogy Slidell paid homage not only to the deceased but also to his own constituents, when he described Mr. Bossier as “one of that ancient population which, in many parts of our State, still preserve the language, manners and

<sup>8</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session, p. 432. March 25, 1844.

<sup>9</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session, April 4, 1844, p. 482.

customs of their fathers; remarkable for their almost patriarchal sympathy, their unbending honesty, their chivalrous courage, their frank and manly spirit—a population surpassed by none in all the wide expanse of this republic, for its patriotic devotion to our free institutions.” In thus lauding his deceased colleague, Slidell found the opportunity for a tribute to the race into which he had so happily married, Mrs. Slidell being the daughter of one of the proudest French creole families in the state. Another passage in this funeral oration, appropriate enough in itself and expressed with dignity and doubtless with conviction, carries one ahead, nevertheless, to a period twelve years later when Slidell’s indifference to the assault upon Charles Sumner was to demonstrate that he, like many others, had forgotten the principles here enunciated. “When to-morrow, we shall follow to the tomb the mortal remains of him who but so recently participated in our deliberations, would it not be well for each and every one of us, standing around his yet unclosed grave, silently to make the solemn pledge that no harsh recriminations, no personal altercations, no unseemly broils, shall hereafter desecrate the solemnity of this hall?”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session, p. 558. Thursday Apr. 25, 1844. For a notice of this address, see Adams, *Memoirs*, XII. 18. “Slidell pronounced a genteel eulogy upon him, lauded him with Latin and French proverbs, and crowned him with a chaplet of French Creole virtues.”

Two days later, Slidell made the most elaborate speech of his career in the lower house and one of the few extended speeches of his parliamentary experience.<sup>11</sup> The subject was doubly inspiring as an opportunity to present his own views upon the tariff and at the same time to strike a blow at the hated Whigs. He opened in a sarcastic vein. "I shall at least have the merit—which I cannot but regret should be so rare a one on this floor—of confining myself to the question before us." That question being the tariff, Slidell expressed astonishment that the Whigs should have adopted it as their chief shibboleth, at the expense of the Bank, which had long been supposed by the uninitiated to be "the sun of the great Whig system."

Passing to the heart of the issue, Slidell developed an economic creed which is as creditable to his business acumen as to his political sagacity. He attributed the financial depression from 1840 to 1843 to over-production, extravagance, and poor currency. Recovery had been due to economy. The doctrine of a national debt he ignored as no longer even advocated. On taxation he offered a comment well in advance of his time:

Of all the modes of raising revenue, direct taxation, in the shape of an uniform per centage upon every species of property, real and personal, or upon income, is, probably, the most equitable that could be devised. It is the only means by which the rich can be made to pay their

<sup>11</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st Session. Appendix, pp. 386-392. April 27, 1844.

fair quota for the support of the government which protects them in the enjoyment of their property. It is certainly the system which would insure the most economical administration; for all experience shows that a heavy indirect taxation is more cheerfully submitted to than a more moderate direct one. The same person who cheerfully because unconsciously pays dollars in the shape of enhanced price caused by imposts on articles of daily necessary consumption, would receive most ungraciously the visit of the national tax-gatherer for a much smaller sum; and in proportion to the grudging reluctance with which he paid the tax, would be the watchful scrutiny with which he would criticise the expenditure.

The interest which the American people of the present day take in a budget system and in efforts, like those of General Dawes, to lop off needless expenditures bears convincing testimony to Slidell's judgment in linking together direct taxation and national economy.

But he recognized that against the theoretical merits of direct taxation certain practical objections could be offered. It meant for one thing a vast increase in Federal patronage, perhaps even at the cost of revenue to the state governments. More unfortunate still, it was opposed to the will of the people. Customs and the sale of public lands were, therefore, however regrettable it might be, the natural resource of government finance. Land would yield but a small per cent of the amount required, and proceeds of land sales "should be devoted exclusively to the payment of the public debt until that important object be

effected." It will be noted that this attitude toward land and the public debt was Jeffersonian in the strictest sense; it is one of Slidell's titles to being a sound Democrat.

With a customs levy inevitable, the problem of adjusting it equitably remained. No class must be overburdened. Customs duties could never be other than unequal, but inequality must be reduced to a minimum. Slidell was perhaps more a Cleveland Democrat than a Jeffersonian when he declared: "In the present state of the question, I am neither for free trade nor for protection other than that which is incidental, and compatible with fair revenue principles."

Free trade, under such conditions as actually faced the treasury, was impracticable, because it would close all the custom houses and lead to direct taxation. Correspondingly, too high a tariff should not be levied, even upon luxuries, for the reason that it would simply promote smuggling and injure both the revenue and honest tradesmen. "It is worse than idle to promulgate laws which we cannot execute." A prohibitive tariff being as inadvisable as free trade, and subject also to the consideration that its effect upon domestic manufacturers would be so stimulating as to exclude foreign goods altogether, Slidell fell into a possibly unconscious sophistry that it too might force the country back upon a direct tax or upon customs duties levied on foreign articles such



as tea, sugar, coffee, wines, spirits, silks, and raw materials, which had already become objects of necessity but which were not capable of home production. "It would not be hazarding much to predict," he asserted, "that in ten years these articles will furnish three-fourths of the whole revenue from imports," and he further added that "imposts, to be productive, must fall upon articles of general consumption."

It was manifestly impossible for a congressman from Louisiana to discuss the tariff without animadverting upon sugar. Slidell faced the issue squarely but shrewdly. Quoting Calhoun and McDuffie as favorable to a tariff on sugar for revenue only, he insisted that the existing tariff was the lowest consistent with a maximum revenue. To reduce the tariff by half a cent would cost the revenue \$1,070,000, an amount not easily spared. As for the planter, even one who was out of debt, present prices insured only a very moderate return upon capital invested. His plea, therefore, was for a continuation of existing duties on sugar. A tariff for revenue was consistent with the continued existence of the planters. The idea of a protective tariff was not entertained, "for all experience shows that monopoly is the parent of carelessness and extravagant expenditure, of weakness and lethargy." On the other hand, protagonists of free trade made no headway with Slidell when they described Great Britain, the homeland of



free trade, as an Elysian Field. "Long may it be before the lords of the factory, the spinning-jenny, and the loom, shall reduce to slavish dependence the yet proud yeomanry of America." From generalities he proceeded to facts, citing the various sugar duties from 1800 to 1842 and declaring once more his belief in the fairness of the existing impost of two and a half cents a pound. "At two cents the present establishments would probably be kept up; but no new ones would be formed below this rate." To hamper Louisiana sugar interests would be equivalent to bestowing a special bonus upon the colonies of Spain. And Slidell inquired, pertinently enough, "Is there anything in our commercial relations with them that should induce us to treat them with particular favor?"

Returning to the defence of the local interest, he declared that "we only make the reasonable request that you will not disturb a long established order of things, coeval with our admission into the great American family, that has gradually directed the enterprise and capital of our citizens into channels from which they cannot now be diverted, without inflicting inevitable ruin upon those embarked in them, and the severest distress upon our State at large." Incidentally, he reminded Congress that while sugar duties had remained stationary, those on cotton and woollens had increased five-fold. Moreover, unlike the

manufacturers in cotton and woolens, sugar planters possessed no monopoly of their market. In addition, to lower the sugar duty would necessitate a levy upon tea and coffee. "Is this any better for the consumer than to pay just on sugar?" With an almost clairvoyant vision of farmers' associations and agricultural "blocs," he pointed out that "The agricultural interests must sustain each other; they have been too long the dupes and victims of factory combinations."

With this the speech may be said to have reached its climax, though interesting matters of detail remained for consideration. For example, Slidell quoted *Hunt's Merchants Magazine* to prove that cessation of sugar production in Louisiana would cause the United States to pay higher prices because of the world's diminished production. Under existing conditions, the planter made only five per cent, surely not an exorbitant return. Moreover, the entire country had an interest in preserving an equilibrium under which Louisiana raised sugar. The North and Northwest feed her; New England sends her manufactured goods and carries them to and fro; while the cotton producing South could only regret a shift in Louisiana from sugar to cotton production which would add 200,000 bales of Louisiana cotton to an overstocked cotton market, with corresponding injury to prices. In fine, "I believe that . . . the knell of the protective tariff system has been rung.

. . . I do not wish the sugar duty to be identified with it." Nevertheless, if changes must be wrought, the intelligent planter would prefer the permanent assurance of two cents to a precarious claim upon two and a half.

The clear thinking of Slidell's early statement of fundamentals in taxation and the art with which he undertook to demonstrate that sugar duties were in harmony with these indisputable premises make this tariff speech of Slidell's a really notable effort of its kind and help one to comprehend the faith which he inspired in practical men.<sup>12</sup>

If Slidell was thus establishing an intellectual claim to recognition in the event of a national Democratic victory, his claim as an active political worker was equally strong. His part in swinging Louisiana into line for Polk in the campaign of 1844 aroused the bitterest antagonism and led to accusations of gross frauds at the polls. Slidell entered upon the contest with a confidence which success was to justify. A letter to Buchanan on the eve of battle, written from New York on September 22, 1844, the first of a long series between the two friends, declares that:

<sup>12</sup> But cf. the dry comment of John Quincy Adams in his *Memoirs*, XII, 19. "The day was consumed in the dullest of hour speeches, with Hopkins in the chair, by James E. Belser, of Alabama, against the tariff, Richard Brodhead, of Easton, Pennsylvania, for it, John Slidell, of New Orleans, on both sides, and Lewis Stenrod, of Wheeling, anti-tariff to the backbone. Four speeches—four hours."

I shall leave here tomorrow for New Orleans. I have not the slightest apprehension respecting the vote of Louisiana, but I should not feel satisfied with myself were I absent from my post on the day of battle. As I shall have occasion to address our friends before we can receive the returns of your governors election I would like to have it in my power to speak with confidence of the vote of Pennsylvania. Can there be any doubt of Shanks election, and what will probably be his majority—your means of information are such that you cannot be much out of the way in your calculations.

I regret not to have had the pleasure of meeting with you since the adjournment. Have you made arrangements for your lodgings during the session—You were kind enough to express a desire that we might be together and nothing would afford me greater satisfaction. Believe me very sincerely,

Your friend and servant,

John Slidell.

Honl. James Buchanan,

Lancaster.<sup>13</sup>

Slidell is here revealed as already on terms of intimacy with one of the leading politicians of his party, the secretary of state in the forthcoming administration. One finds in this circumstance and in the capacities and energies of Slidell an explanation of the choice which was to fall upon him rather than upon Calhoun or any other man to conduct the delicate and dangerous negotiations which Polk relied upon to avert a war with Mexico.

<sup>13</sup> Buchanan Papers. Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Slidell to Buchanan. September 22, 1844.

The campaign in Louisiana, upon which Slidell entered so joyously, was disgraced by much illegal voting.<sup>14</sup> Strong bodies of roughs were imported into doubtful districts, particularly that of Plaquemine, lying to the south of New Orleans, apparently by both sides, but so much of the odium attached to Slidell that he was obliged to notice the charges when Congress convened for the second session. These charges were pressed from a most awkward source, by none other than Barrow, the senator from Louisiana to whose position Slidell was himself eventually to succeed. Barrow, in a speech on the annexation of Texas, which he opposed, declared that resolutions of the Louisiana legislature favorable to annexation did not necessarily represent the will of the people "because he knew full well that that election had been carried by the most infamous frauds . . . however it might have been in other states—in the State of Louisiana at least Mr. Clay was cheated—villanously [sic] cheated out of the electoral vote of that State."<sup>15</sup>

incomplete

Slidell replied on the following day. He regretted that party squabbles should be injected into so grave a question as that of annexation. For this reason he had ignored some unfavorable comments by a member from North Carolina. The charges of Barrow were, however, too

<sup>14</sup> For an account of this see G. P. Garrison, *Westward Extension* in the American Nation Series.

<sup>15</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 233. Senate, Feb. 3, 1845.

pointed to ignore, and Slidell carried the war right into enemy territory by admitting that in so hotly contested an election there were doubtless some frauds, but he insisted that the preponderance of blame lay with the Whigs.

He had no doubt whatever that if a balance could have been struck, of every vote on either side, illegally rejected, or illegally received, the result would have been a large addition to the democratic majority of the State of Louisiana. . . . He would not indulge in the acrimonious language which had been used in another part of this building. . . . Some paliation [sic] for it might be found in the bitterness of disappointed hopes. But he should feel that he was doing an injustice to the democracy of Louisiana, if he did not declare it to be his solemn and deliberate conviction, that nine-tenths of all election frauds that have ever been perpetrated in that State were of Whig origin, and in favor of Whig candidates."<sup>10</sup>

As if charges and countercharges in the Plaquemine frauds were not troubles enough of his own, Slidell was involved in those of Joshua Giddings, the abolitionist member from Ohio. Giddings, on February 6, 1845, opposed a bill to compensate certain Georgia slave-owners to the amount of \$141,000 as payment in lieu of the children which would have been borne by slave-women who had become fugitives among the Indians. Black of Georgia, in reply, asserted that Giddings had been interested in horses used to aid Maryland slaves to escape, intimated that Gid-

<sup>10</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, Feb. 4, 1845, p. 243.



dings belonged in the penitentiary, and affirmed that the franking through the mail of a calico dress for his wife was in itself sufficient ground to put him there if Congress so chose.

While Giddings was on his feet in denial of both stories, Black entered a small aisle adjacent to the speaker and, brandishing a cane, shouted: "If you repeat those words, I will knock you down." Determined to test the courage of Black, Giddings did repeat them, but Black meanwhile was carried away by his friends. As Giddings went on with his remarks it was the turn of another bully, Dawson of Louisiana, to silence him. With hand placed threateningly on his pocket, he cried: "I'll shoot him, by G-d! I'll shoot him!" Causin, a Maryland Whig, now placed himself between the two men, facing Dawson and ready to fire. At this juncture Slidell and three others drew up for the defence of Dawson. The party of Giddings was similarly reenforced, and the scene was laid for melodrama, if not for tragedy. The southerners may have felt that their situation was ridiculous. At any rate, Slidell and others of the Dawson contingent withdrew one by one, leaving their captain alone to confront Causin while Giddings went on with his speech.<sup>17</sup> In all of this, Slidell's was fortunately not a major rôle. It probably, however, won rather than lost him friends.

<sup>17</sup> George W. Julian, *The Life of Joshua R. Giddings*, (Chicago, 1892), pp. 172-174.



On the whole the second session was for Slidell less happy than the first, and his activity, while probably undiminished, won him less distinction. He was, for example, one of eight against 171 to vote in opposition to calculating congressional railway mileage by the nearest and most direct mail route.<sup>18</sup> On the question of duelling his vote deserves no praise. Upon rumor of an impending duel between Clingman and Yancy a resolution was introduced by Preston King, "That if it shall appear to the said Committee . . . that any member of this House have been engaged in fighting a duel on account of words spoken in debate on this floor, then the said Committee are instructed to report the facts with a resolution to expel from this House any member or members guilty of such crime."<sup>19</sup> This dignified and humane resolution Slidell moved to table, apparently having already forgotten his own remarks at the funeral of Bossier. His motion was lost, 75 to 94. On a vote to concur with a committee which had stricken out a proviso allowing Florida in certain circumstances to erect another state, East Florida, Slidell went on record as opposed. In other words he favored a chance to make another slave state there.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 63, Dec. 23, 1844.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144, Jan. 16, 1845.

<sup>20</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 286, Feb. 13, 1845.

On the other hand, much of his legislative activity was progressive. He invariably took a constructive interest in naval affairs, and a motion to insure to the several states and territories their fair proportion in the appointment of midshipmen<sup>21</sup> to Annapolis was conducive to inter-state harmony and the good of the service. Similarly, Slidell's anxiety to deprive congressmen absent from duty for any other cause than illness of their per diem allowance is creditable to his judgment and his honesty.<sup>22</sup> This sensitiveness to the niceties of business honor underlay another resolution of Slidell's, namely that the President be requested to inform the house of all cases of embezzlement of the funds of the United States by public officers, and further to state the number of prosecutions or the reasons for exemption.<sup>23</sup> That his interest in economy was not narrow and petty appears in what for Slidell was a lengthy speech in behalf of a \$20,000 appropriation to restore the dilapidated furniture of the White House. He scorned what he deemed the demagogic play of economizing on the President's furniture.<sup>24</sup> But it is of course possible in this case that Slidell, the good Democrat, was primarily interested in an adequate setting for the Democratic President whose election he had labored so hard to insure.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373, Feb. 28, 1845.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327, Feb. 21, 1845.

<sup>23</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, Jan. 23, 1845.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-310, Feb. 19, 1845.

He was also quite willing to be liberal with appropriations of interest to New Orleans, \$100,000<sup>25</sup> for a new custom house, and \$300,000 for harbor improvement.<sup>26</sup>

More striking than these motions of routine, however, revealing as they may be as to the temperament of their author, was a resolution on behalf of an amendment to the constitution of the United States. It is true that Slidell was not a youth. But this was his first Congress, and so radical a proposal betrayed no lack of self-confidence. His resolution, never adopted in form but now partially followed in substance, was distinctly liberal in tone and forward looking.

*Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, two thirds of both Houses concurring, That the following amendment of the constitution of the United States be proposed to the several States, to be valid, to all intents and purposes, as part of said constitution, when ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of said States, viz: The election of President and Vice-President shall hereafter be made directly by the people, or the legislatures, of the several States, without the intervention of electors. Each State shall, in such manner as the legislature thereof may direct, give as many votes for President and Vice-President as may be equal to the whole number of senators and representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress. The returns of said votes shall be certified and transmitted by the several states in the manner*

<sup>25</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 323-326, Feb. 21, 1845, and p. 65, Dec. 23, 1844.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356, Feb. 26, 1845.

and form now prescribed for certifying and transmitting the votes of the electoral college.<sup>27</sup>

With Slidell the rise to national eminence was a gradual process. His were not the dashing qualities which lift their owner to sudden and dazzling heights. He was fifty years old when he entered the house of representatives, and that is scarcely the final goal of most aspirants for nation-wide fame. But Slidell built on solid foundations, and each successive step was upheld by the confidence of his contemporaries. Certainly his congressional record was solid, if not brilliant, and his party services entitled him to executive recognition. President Polk and, doubtless more particularly, Secretary Buchanan knew their man when they selected Slidell, altogether untrained in formal diplomacy but a master in the manipulation of men, for the delicate mission of soothing an offended Mexico and winning from her not only recognition of the Texan *fait accompli* but also further concessions.

Slidell accepted the mission with alacrity. "Should a minister be appointed, the charge will at least be a responsible one, and should a negotiation be brought to a favorable issue, credit and reputation will be acquired. Should your views be unchanged, and my appointment be entirely satisfactory, I think that I *ought* not to decline

<sup>27</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 41, Dec. 17, 1844.

it."<sup>28</sup> At the same time he felt that his constituents were entitled to an explanation for his seeming abandonment of their interests by quitting Congress. His embarrassment in the situation is conveyed to Buchanan in the following letter.

The circumstances under which I shall leave Louisiana deprive me of all opportunity of explaining to my friends the manner in which the appointment has been tendered to me and the motives which have governed me in accepting it. These motives will be freely canvassed by my political opponents here, and as they will have the start of me, I could desire to have as early a correction as possible. This can only be done by an authoritative editorial declaration in the Union that I have not sought office and did not determine to accept it without much hesitation.<sup>29</sup> The distinguished compliment which the offer conveyed and the very responsible and arduous character of the mission, must be my apologies for vacating my seat in Congress.<sup>30</sup>

Two other letters in the Slidell-Buchanan correspondence pertain to the period preceding the Mexican mission. On October 23rd, Slidell is in considerable alarm lest all his efforts on behalf of the Louisiana sugar tariff prove unavailing. He fears lest the administration may have committed

<sup>28</sup> Buchanan Papers, in the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Slidell to Buchanan, May, 1845.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Slidell to Buchanan, Oct. 1, 1845.

<sup>30</sup> To make sure that such an editorial was prepared, Slidell appealed also to Nicholas P. Trist, chief clerk in the state department. See Nicholas P. Trist Papers. Library of Congress. Slidell to Trist. "Ship S. Mary's, Nov. 20, 1845." Trist was already commissioned to forward a draft to Slidell's account in New Orleans and to cancel the lease of a house in Washington taken for the congressional season. *Ibid.*

itself to a reduction even below two cents a pound. "For the sake of conciliation and harmony, I would yield much, but I am not prepared to adopt the wild vagaries of Mr. Duffie, etc. . . . A horizontal tariff is an absurdity, the party that will make that issue is doomed to inevitable defeat."<sup>31</sup> Again on November 19th, just on the eve of sailing, Slidell writes in good spirits, but with evidence of a volatile and high-strung nervous system, that "You have indeed given me a splendid chance for distinction and I assure you that it shall not be my fault if I do not succeed. I feel in high spirits and hope to give a good account of myself. . . . I have had no sleep for two nights; it is now midnight. I have arranged to embark at seven tomorrow morning."<sup>32</sup>

Slidell had indeed come to one of the great opportunities of his life. He approached the task with intelligence and enthusiasm. If he should fail, it would not, as he said, be his fault.

<sup>31</sup> Buchanan Papers. Slidell to Buchanan, Oct. 23, 1845.

<sup>32</sup> Buchanan Papers. Slidell to Buchanan, Nov. 19, 1845.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MISSION TO MEXICO

BY his mission to Mexico Slidell became an empire-builder and linked his name with the expansion of the American people. For in that amazing development which has extended American dominion from Porto Rico to the Philippines, from Panama to Alaska, few more significant steps have been taken than the incorporation of Texas into the Union and the guiding of our southern boundary to the Pacific. The extreme sectionalism of America at the time led many to a false interpretation of our Mexican relations, and historians were long disposed to perpetuate the error. But an examination of the diplomatic moves preceding the war suggests that America bore provocation patiently and moved slowly, even honorably, toward her goal. For our diplomacy, even on the eve of the war, was not a half-hearted blind to conceal preparations, nor a ceremonial slavery to etiquette, but a manful endeavor to achieve great ends by liberal means.

In the autumn of 1845 President Polk determined to give Mexico one last day of grace. Since



Jackson's time conditions to the south of us had gone from bad to worse until, in face of our determination to annex Texas, diplomatic relations had ceased. Yet American expansion, the slavery question, the very peace of the Union, hinged on a successful renewal of the relations. Polk, an outspoken imperialist, led a divided country. If his secretary of the treasury, Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, urged the annexation of Texas and a vast expansion of slavery in the Southwest, John Quincy Adams and New England as stoutly opposed; nor were the great number of conservatives of the Buchanan type committed to any definite policy of expansion. Through peaceful measures only could Polk guide a united following and offer a minimum of target to his enemies. Hence his plan to solve the Texas problem and to acquire Mexican lands without resort to arms.

A solution offered itself in the American claims against Mexico, which a board of arbitration had estimated at \$2,026,139.68<sup>1</sup> and on which only three installments had been paid. What more providential arrangement could be suggested than to take payment in land for these heavy arrears and, if need be, to add a liberal bonus to smooth the path of diplomacy and to quiet the conscience of statesmen! Mexico had withdrawn her am-

<sup>1</sup>*Senate Executive Document, Number 52, 30th Congress, 1st Session, Buchanan's instructions to Slidell. Also Executive Document, Number 196, p. 33, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-46, and J. B. Moore, The Works of James Buchanan, VI. 297.*

bassador on March 7, 1845, and international courtesy demanded that she take the first steps in any renewal of diplomatic relations. But Polk was willing to waive all ceremony.<sup>2</sup> A great power could take the initiative gracefully, and peace was essential to his program. He had always favored the annexation of Texas; he had cast longing eyes upon northern Mexico; but by 1845 the fear of the "slave power" had become too keen an issue at the North to hazard an unnecessary war upon its account. Polk's policy, then, demanded a renewal of peaceful negotiations, but such a mission as would accomplish the full measure of Polk's aims would require delicate handling. Mexico must see the light. She must learn, what nine years of guerilla fighting had failed to teach her, that Texas was no longer hers. She must learn the value of money and the wisdom of paying her debts. She must sell her lands to raise this money. Hardest of all for a proud people, she must learn to pocket her pride.

Our consul at the Mexican capital prepared the way, and Mexico agreed to receive as envoy "*one commissioned with full power to settle the dispute in a peaceful, reasonable, and honorable manner.*" That John Slidell was chosen for the post was an honor so much the greater, as the difficulties were understood in advance. Victory would mean glory;

<sup>2</sup> *Executive Document, Number 196, p. 81, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-46.*

failure would involve no disgrace. The two issues for Slidell to settle were the annexation of Texas and the settlement of our Mexican claims. The great cause of Texan annexation had been before the American people since Calhoun first advocated it in 1836, but it was allowed to lapse until the famous Gilmer letter of January 10, 1843,<sup>3</sup> pleaded for immediate action before the growing influence of Great Britain should bring about abolition. This letter raised such a storm of protest in New England that the Report of March 3, 1843, signed by Adams and fifteen other members of Congress, went so far as to foretell that the North would not submit to a violation of the "national compact," but that that section would prefer instead "a dissolution of the Union." Walker's masterful counterplea of January 8, 1844, re-enforced the Monroe Doctrine with a warning that Texas in unfriendly hands was too near New Orleans. Walker painted a glowing picture of Texas as a market for northern goods, a field for southern enterprise, a solution for the Negro problem, and, from its logical unity with the great Mississippi Valley, a necessary safeguard to the Oregon Trail. In fact, as General Jackson had viewed it, its annexation was a military necessity. Texas, he contended, was free by the same right of revolution which had established Mexico, and failure to annex her would ultimately mean Brit-

<sup>3</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, January 26, 1843.

ish control of Texas as well as of a new league including our southern and southwestern states. The strong element of truth in Walker's picture won many to the cause, but even so the "Joint Resolutions"<sup>4</sup> for Texas annexation were carried only by the slenderest possible margin, 27 to 25. The annexation of Texas was, then, a fact. It was Slidell's task to interpret this fact to the very slow perceptions of Mexico. The Mexicans, once having mastered the idea that Texas was no longer theirs, would next have to learn its new boundary.<sup>5</sup> At this point the American claims would arise as a convenient leverage for securing a liberal interpretation of this boundary. In fact Polk named the settlement of the claims as an indisputable object of the Slidell mission. "I could not, for a moment, entertain the idea that the claims of our much injured and long suffering citizens . . . should be postponed, or separated, from the settlement of the boundary question."<sup>6</sup>

There existed, therefore, a complicated background of slavery extension, westward expansion, Anglophobia, Mexican irritation, and armed intervention, all of which Slidell had to consider in his mission of peace. The situation was undoubtedly a delicate one, but historical fairness forbids

<sup>4</sup>February 27, 1845.

<sup>5</sup>Taylor had orders to advance to the Rio Grande as a boundary. *Executive Document, Number 196*, pp. 70-71. 29th Congress, 1st Session.

<sup>6</sup>*Executive Document, Number 196*, p. 2. 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-6. Polk's Message.

that we read into Polk's policy a deliberate intention to provoke a war with a weaker power under the hypocritical mask of a desire for peace. Polk's somewhat jaunty talk about paying huge sums to Mexico for ceded territory,<sup>7</sup> while it betrays gross ignorance of the Spanish character, ought to acquit him of a malicious determination for war on any pretext.<sup>8</sup> There is unimpeachable evidence, moreover, that he desired Slidell to be received and the negotiations to progress,<sup>9</sup> though the degree of his actual faith in the mission and in the ends to be achieved is a matter of conjecture. Many of Polk's instructions were oral; many of his projects were not confided even to his journal; and Slidell, though "obliged to make an exception in favor of Mrs. S.[lidell]"<sup>10</sup> was pledged to secrecy. Neither Polk nor Slidell could feel entirely sanguine, yet Slidell entered upon the mission confident that Mexico "desire[d] to settle amicably all the questions in dispute between us. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Did not manifest destiny point to a continental empire from ocean to ocean? Would not Providence, which had done so much for us, round out its labors? Was not Texas necessary to our national life if we were to be free from British or

<sup>7</sup> *Reports of Committees*, 1st Session, 29th Congress, Volume IV, 1845-6, Report Number 752, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 35, September 16, 1845.

<sup>9</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 36, September 17, 1845.

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Moore (Ed.), *Works of James Buchanan*, VI. 265.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, VI. 265.

French aggression? Surely there was ground for hope that these desirable ends could be attained by peaceful means. But whatever real confidence Slidell and the administration felt must have been due to a belief that Mexico would see the need of making the best of things. To help her in adopting this policy they were ready to be liberal.<sup>12</sup> If hope blinded them to some of the difficulties, it was only natural.

The opposition saw these obstacles more clearly. Thus the Reverend Dr. Ellis<sup>13</sup> held that no Mexican government could survive which would voluntarily surrender Texas. Only war could attain that object, and as war would precipitate European intervention; "our possession under any circumstances, must be a possession secured by force." But the ability of a New England opposition to see a mote in its brother's eye does not justify the imputation of base motives to Polk or his government. The hopeless confusion of Mexican affairs was not a temporary aberration. It was chronic. Though many of our Mexican claims were doubtless absurd, others were thoroughly valid, and these had been all too long in abeyance. Self-respect demanded action. Nor could action be deferred in the idle dream that Mexico, unham-

<sup>12</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 33-35.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters upon the Annexation of Texas—Address to Hon. John Quincy Adams*, 1845. Ellis was an eminent Unitarian divine, pastor of the Harvard Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The letters, fifteen in number, extend from December 19, 1844, to March 15, 1845.



pered, might recover her power in the north. The loss of Tamaulipas was far more probable than the recovery of Texas.

The final steps toward dispatching the mission were not taken until Polk had used all possible means to sound Mexican sentiment and to be assured of a welcome for the commissioner. Preliminary negotiations were conducted through Mr. Black, the consul at Mexico City, but other agents were also used,<sup>14</sup> and reports from Commodore Conner of the squadron in the Gulf of Mexico and Dr. Parrott, our confidential agent at Mexico, confirmed Polk in a belief that "the government of Mexico were willing . . . to receive a Minister from the U. States" and "anxious to settle the pending difficulties between the two countries, including those of boundary." Assuredly, Polk did not enter blindly upon the fruitless embassy. He had made careful soundings. With a clearness of vision unusual in American Presidents, he defined his aim. With a precision of action rare in diplomacy, he sought it. Slidell and his mission were a step toward its fulfillment. If successful, so much the better; if a failure, there were at hand other means, less desirable, perhaps, but more certain.

Of the instructions finally given to Slidell only a synopsis is necessary. As already indicated, they covered two principal points, the recognition

<sup>14</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 91, 93.



of the annexation of Texas, with a settlement of its boundary, and the final adjudication of our claims against Mexico. But bound up with both these points was a vast scheme of empire to carry the southern boundary of the United States to the Pacific. For this last, Polk was willing to pay a great price in proportion as the boundary was more or less satisfactory to the administration. Starting from the independence of Texas as "a settled fact, and . . . not to be called into question," Slidell was ordered to uphold the Rio Grande as the established boundary, and in compensation to assume payment of our claims. For actual cessions of Mexican territory, a sliding scale of prices was authorized. For such a line as would include New Mexico and thus "obviate the danger of future collisions," the claims would be cancelled and a bonus of five millions would be paid. For the grander scheme of a cession of California, "money would be no object compared with the value of the acquisition." Its amount would vary with the line determined upon. Twenty-five millions would be none too much for a line "from the southern extremity of New Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, . . . which would embrace Monterey within our limits;" twenty millions, for a similar line "so as to include the bay and harbor of San Francisco. . . . Of course when I speak of any point on the western boundary of New Mexico; it is understood that from the Del Norte

to that point our boundary shall run according to the first offer which you have been authorized to make." Finally, Slidell was bidden to conclude a treaty, even if it should include only one of the specified objects of his mission.

The objection may arise that the whole scheme was to be a trade on Mexico's poverty; that to accept land in place of gold and to soothe the American pride of conscience by giving American dollars for more land than could properly be seized under any pretext of foreclosure was a Machiavelian contrivance to spread the eagle and slavery over a wider compass. But that would involve a preconceived notion that Polk and his policies were inherently depraved, that the "interests" were a unit for land grabbing—a position not easily tenable in view of powerful opposition from New England and the North—, and that the idea of national destiny which animated so many minds was a mere slogan, foisted by many interested persons upon a gullible public. The cynic, too, may smile at a kindness which would absorb New Mexico so that there might be no occasion to ask for it again. But in his California policy, at least, no question exists of Polk's sincerity. Vigorous action was so essential at a time when our Pacific expansion at the north was in jeopardy that his California project must count as at least one point in proof of Polk's desire that the mission succeed. Moreover, while it is puzzling to

see how a constitutional President could have the assurance to propose it on his own responsibility, the very heavy payment which the minister was instructed to offer for California is indubitable evidence of Polk's anxiety for a peaceful settlement. The maximum offer of twenty-five millions was immense in comparison with what had been paid for Louisiana or Florida. And it is against all reason to imagine that Polk's offer of money was intended as a sting to Mexican pride which would goad that country into war. His worst detractors have not accused Polk of stupidity. On the contrary, his strong sagacity would warn him that from a merely political point of view the peaceful and lawful purchase of the west would be far preferable to a war of conquest waged in opposition to northern sentiment.<sup>15</sup> In view of the sharp political opposition to any extension of slave territory, and considering the nature of instructions which authorized a treaty even if only a single object could be achieved, and which imposed a studious deference to Mexican pride, there would seem to be no possible ground for assuming a secret desire for war. The plan, instead, seems a masterly solution of Polk's difficulties,—much gain, no war, and an opposition silenced.

Armed with these instructions, Slidell entered upon his mission, one of the most delicate in the

<sup>15</sup> Not so strong as imagined, however.

history of American diplomacy. It was his task to persuade the bankrupt and tottering government of a proud people that because of its poverty it must clutch at any straw to pay its debts. It would have taxed the ingenuity of Mephistopheles to show this moribund machine a method of yielding to American demands while yet pampering Mexican pride into a belief that loss of territory was consistent with national honor. Slidell was foredoomed to failure by the inherent impossibility of inducing an impossible government to accept impossible terms. In short, Mexican politicians were too weak to face the realities of things. To yield to Polk's demands would have meant revolution and overthrow at the hands of a people blind to facts as old even as the Texan revolution of 1836. To resist those demands might secure at least a temporary popularity. Caught between the devil and the deep sea, the Mexican government felt it better to conciliate the deep sea and let the rather more distant devil look after his own. The entire conduct of the Mexican Government in refusing to recognize Slidell shows how a weak and corrupt machine, daily facing overthrow, toyed and trifled over issues of life and death for the very nation, for there is no longer room to doubt that on the fate of Slidell's mission depended the existence of Mexico as an independent nationality.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> E. G. Bourne, *American Historical Review*, V. 491; W. E. Dodd, *Illinois State Historical Journal*, July, 1912.

Preliminary to Slidell's arrival, the United States tried to conciliate Mexico by withdrawing the fleet from the waters of Vera Cruz. The Mexican foreign secretary, Peña y Peña, had urged this as a proof of sincerity, and the government at Washington had yielded, confiding in Black's opinion that the negotiation would progress, as it had the sanction of the Mexican Congress in secret session. The path was therefore supposedly clear when Slidell quietly departed for Mexico in late November, 1845, his movements being known only to the state department. But no sooner had he reached Vera Cruz than he was urged not to disembark. Peña y Peña declared that he had not been expected until January and that so critical was the condition of affairs in the capital that his appearance there would defeat the whole matter. Worse still, to shift responsibility, the Secretary submitted to the Council of Government the final decision as to Slidell's reception. This council was a remarkable body, representing, in fact, wheels within wheels, the inner sovereignty of the nation. It voiced the will of the Archbishop of Mexico<sup>17</sup> and could be counted on for definite opposition to the heretics over the border. To submit the question of receiving Slidell to such a body was, therefore, a distinct breach of faith. It could give only one decision.

<sup>17</sup> See *Polk's Diary*, I. 229, for the political importance of the Archbishop.

Peña y Peña's formal and unqualified refusal to treat with Slidell was not delivered until December 21, 1845. It was based largely on a quibble that his credentials were those of "a minister to reside near the Government of Mexico" as in ordinary circumstances, whereas Mexico had assented only to a special mission "confined to the difference in relation to the Texas question." He assured Slidell that "the government itself was disposed to arrange all differences," but that the situation was so critical as to demand great caution and circumspection. Would the Mexican have dared such a subterfuge had Slidell left the United States in a public way, and with the American people in full knowledge of the preliminary arrangements for his reception? Was not Polk's anxiety for secrecy from the vigilance of England and France in itself subversive of a successful mission? Be that as it may, the wily Mexican was quick enough to grasp the straw.

The decision as to whether Slidell should be received rested necessarily with the Mexican government, but the minister omitted no effort which could advance his claims. He obeyed instructions faithfully. He insisted that all communications make use of his official title,<sup>18</sup> and, in a final memorial to Peña y Peña, he recapitulated in a most convincing way the plan and scope of the mission

<sup>18</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Document 196, p. 30.



as originally understood by both governments. Writing three days after the rejection of his overtures, he placed stress on the point that the United States had proposed an "envoy" "*to adjust all the questions in dispute between the two powers,*" and that Mexico had agreed to receive a "commissioner" "*with full power to settle those disputes in a peaceful, reasonable and honorable manner.*" He concluded by saying that the great object of his undertaking had been "by the removal of all mutual causes of complaint for the past, and of distrust for the future, to revive, confirm, and if possible to strengthen these sympathies."<sup>19</sup> Slidell was undoubtedly piqued at the Mexican refusal to give him even a chance, and when we remember Polk's extravagant desire for territory and the strong reasons for obtaining it without war, there appears no reason to question his sincerity of purpose and chagrin at defeat. In the bitterness of his disappointment he assured Buchanan that further negotiations would be practicable only when hostile demonstrations should have convinced the Mexican people "that our differences must be settled promptly either by negotiation or [by] the sword."<sup>20</sup> For the present there was no alternative but to leave the capital.

<sup>19</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Number 196, p. 35. Italics are Slidell's.

<sup>20</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. For the similar views of Santa Anna and Atocha see *Polk's Diary*, I. 224. February 13, 1846.



He accordingly withdrew to Jalapa, there to await developments.

Polk's plans regarding Mexico formed only part of a larger whole in an administration conspicuous for its many-sided activity, and the rejection of Slidell may readily be traced to a Mexican policy of delaying the settlement of the Texas boundary until the United States should be too deeply involved with England over the Oregon question to have time or energy to press her rights in the south. Similarly, it was open to belief that Polk centered his interest more on Mexico than on Oregon and that he sacrificed his campaign cry of "54°40', or Fight" to a protection of southern interests. Far better for a southern Democratic President, given his choice of only part of a loaf, to prefer that part which would most benefit his own section and would least endanger the Union. Mexico planned shrewdly, but she made her mistake in counting too strongly on our possible difficulties with England. As Slidell himself wrote<sup>21</sup> from his "observatory" at Jalapa respecting the government which had superseded Herrera's, ". . . my reception . . . will mainly be controlled by the aspect of the Oregon question. Should our difficulties with Great Britain continue to present a prospect of war with that power, there will be but a very faint hope of a change of policy

<sup>21</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Number 196, p. 47. February 6, 1846.

here." Under these circumstances, Slidell's inability to secure an audience in no sense represented a personal failure, and Buchanan's replies to his periodical reports breathe not the slightest hint of reproach.<sup>22</sup>

From his new coign of vantage at Jalapa, Slidell was able to render good service to his government as an observer of Mexican affairs. From here he noted a situation developing which was later to place within our grasp all northern and eastern Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Yucatan, in particular, he regarded as the corner-stone of the new empire.

News of Slidell's treatment caused the return of the Gulf Squadron to Mexican waters, and in this movement, combined with the advance of General Taylor to the left bank of the Rio Grande, Slidell recognized measures likely to have a salutary influence. Internal conditions also seemed to be grouping themselves favorably to his ends. Alaman and Paredes, the new Mexican military leaders, were suspected of monarchical tendencies, and their downfall was assured. In such a maze of embarrassments, it was natural for the leaders to shift responsibility upon the shoulders of a dictator, but the people were opposed to such a course, and Slidell anticipated that they would welcome intervention by the United States as a deliverance from prospective tyranny, a natural

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. January 20, 1846.

<sup>23</sup> An outcome only prevented by Trist's mission.

return to a friendship found useful in the original war for Mexican independence. Best of all, the fiscal situation had reached an acute stage. Mazatlan, the second port in Mexico, had declared against Paredes and had cut off thereby a great revenue indispensable to a leader who would retain the loyalty of his troops or who would avert European interference on the pretext of long overdue interest on bonds and other loans.<sup>24</sup> Altogether Slidell regarded the situation as auspicious. "My note," he wrote Buchanan on March 1, 1846,<sup>25</sup> "will be presented at the most propitious moment that could have been selected. All attempts to effect a loan have completely failed." That this hopefulness was shared by others is plain from Commodore Conner's letter to General Taylor, written from his flagship off Vera Cruz, March 2, 1846.<sup>26</sup> "Mr. Slidell is still at Jalapa; and though unlikely as it may appear, I have it from very good authority that it is probable he will yet be received by the Mexican Government."

In a sense this was the parting of the ways. The outlook did not again appear so hopeful, and, in an attempt to estimate the forces at work, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine just how sincere the government's desire remained to treat with Mexico, at any rate to treat on the

<sup>24</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Number 196, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

original basis on which Slidell had been dispatched. One feels that the mission from now on till its termination existed only to preserve appearances. The American people were to be taught to recognize themselves as martyrs to the criminal delay, the wanton folly, of an impotent government. This rather pharisaical programme demanded that we maintain a show of anxiety to treat. Slidell's mission had acquired a new usefulness, a by-product, so to speak, of its original purpose, a significance which Buchanan's final instructions<sup>27</sup> clearly recognized. " . . . in the present distracted condition of Mexico, it is of importance that we should have an able and discreet agent in that country to watch the progress of events." The excuse for remaining was entirely plausible, since governments in Mexico were short-lived, and what one refused another might grant. To rest content with the refusal of one would even be dangerous as "It would be difficult . . . to satisfy the American people that all had been done which ought to have been done to avoid the necessity of resorting to hostilities," and Congress might refuse to support the active measures which Polk proposed to institute upon Slidell's final return.<sup>28</sup>

To confuse this new phase of the mission with its original conception is unhistorical. New times

<sup>27</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Number 196, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

bribe  
demanded new methods, but even yet there lingered traces of good will toward a republic which Buchanan so frequently described as "distracted." Moore's edition of the works of Buchanan includes a letter, which was judiciously expurgated before it was submitted to Congress, in which Buchanan directed Slidell to inform Paredes "in some discreet manner that the United States were both able and willing to relieve his administration from pecuniary embarrassment."<sup>29</sup> The only return to be exacted was justice and a settlement of the boundary. There is reason to feel that this attempted bribe was a genuine move in a last effort to secure peaceably a tract which we had now resolved to gain at all hazards. It was a case of natural evolution. Thwarted desire had grown into determination. Determination, in turn, led to action, but it is unjust to read the aftermath, the Mexican War and the peace settlement, into the original motives of the Slidell mission. These were undoubtedly peaceable, and only the blunders of Mexican officials changed their import.

The new drift of events was clear to Slidell, and in it he found a compensation for the failure of his mission as originally contemplated. He had become a necessary link in a chain which was to punish his adversaries. He must remain at his post so as "to place us in the strongest moral posi-

<sup>29</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, VI. 403. March 12, 1846.

tion before our own people and the world by exhausting every possible means of conciliation."<sup>30</sup> . . . The mission had become supremely useful in its derivative possibilities. Primary results Slidell no longer anticipated.<sup>31</sup> "We shall never be able to treat with her on fair terms," he informed Buchanan, "until she has been taught to respect us." A four months' residence in Mexico had shown him what Colonel Atocha, confidential agent of Santa Anna in Washington during a part of this period, had originally foretold, that Mexico required an object lesson before she would take the United States seriously.<sup>32</sup>

While Slidell was in Mexico itself, Polk was corresponding with the exiled Santa Anna. It was a match of wits in which the Spanish mind won first place. Santa Anna was using the United States as a tool to aid in his return to Mexico, and to win Polk's support he was willing to declare for a boundary which would give us everything north and east of the "Western Texas line and the Colorado of the West down through the bay of San Francisco,"<sup>33</sup> subject to a payment of thirty millions. In these communications the go-between was Colonel Atocha, an

<sup>30</sup> *Executive Document*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-1846. Number 196, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> For very favorable letters regarding Colonel Atocha, see *Memorial of Alexander J. Atocha to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States*, pp. 15, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 224. February 13, 1846. Report of Colonel Atocha.



American citizen who had done a great banking business at Mexico where he had exceptional opportunities to sound the depths of fiscal and general management there in vogue, who spoke the truth when he assured Polk that a display of force could alone bring the Mexicans to reason.<sup>34</sup> Atocha's business had been with leaders. He knew their venality. He was undoubtedly correct in his view that Paredes, Almonte, and Santa Anna were all willing for an arrangement which would settle many difficulties and direct a flow of gold into their pockets.<sup>35</sup> What he failed to estimate was the temper of the common people, their patriotism, their contempt for the foreigner, their blindness to painful truths. If Polk's government had had to deal only with leaders uninfluenced by the will of the people, Slidell's mission would have been a success.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the leaders had done much to stimulate this very fanaticism which was hindering their own plans. The people, originally misled, were finally demanding a course of action which their leaders knew would be fatal. It was a case of mob-rule—democracy gone to seed—in a land which could not comprehend the rudiments of self-government. To some extent Slidell had anticipated this rock of stum-

<sup>34</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 228-9. February 16, 1846.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See *Polk's Diary*, I. 303 for a "slush fund" for use among the leaders. Also I. 229.



bling. "They have stimulated popular prejudice to a degree that may render any appearance of disposition to treat with us fatal to the new administration," he wrote Buchanan before he left the United States.<sup>37</sup> This idea was fully developed in Ellis's letters to John Quincy Adams appearing in the *Boston Atlas* during 1845.<sup>38</sup> From this point of view, not Polk nor any other one person was the mainspring behind the Mexican War, but the unrestrained democracy of nineteenth century Mexico, which was to repeat the experiment of a similarly unrestrained democracy of antiquity. Call Mexico 'Athens,' and we have another 'Peloponnesian War,' waged by a people blind to facts and ignorant of underlying conditions.

By April Slidell's position was seen to be utterly hopeless, and the time had come for Polk to adjust his plans accordingly. He had determined upon war, but felt it unwise to precipitate congressional action until Slidell should have received his passports and left the country.<sup>39</sup> Though no great admirer of Calhoun, he saw that it was best to take him into his confidence before proceeding to extremities. This he did on April 18th, 1846, and showed a bit of personal animus toward Calhoun

<sup>37</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, VI. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Printed in *Letters upon the Annexation of Texas Addressed to Hon. John Quincy Adams*, 1845.

<sup>39</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 327.

by holding British influence partly responsible for Slidell's failure to be received.<sup>40</sup>

With the return of Slidell from Mexico, his mission may properly be said to have terminated. If it really aimed at the peaceful absorption of most of northern Mexico, it had failed; if it aimed at justifying us before the world, it had slight success, because the world as a whole from then till now has regarded the United States as the aggressor in an unjust war for conquest; if it aimed at saving the American conscience, it succeeded much more widely than many have admitted, because the war with Mexico was not the unpopular brigandage which Lowell's *Bigelow Papers* would have us believe.<sup>41</sup> It was no doubt this third aspect of the mission that won Polk's approval, for on several occasions he championed Slidell against the personal hostility of Colonel Thomas Hart Benton, assuring him that Slidell's conduct of the mission had been perfectly satisfactory.<sup>42</sup>

The demands which Slidell was to have made were small compared to the possibilities which the war was to place within our reach, and, when the time came for treaty-making, the opposition saw a chance to embarrass the government by insisting that the Slidell instructions be made public. Polk refused, and in this he was sustained by his

<sup>40</sup> *Polk's Diary*, I. 337. It will be remembered that Calhoun had opposed the radicalism of Polk's election promise.

<sup>41</sup> Proof of this lies in the muster rolls from the northern states.

<sup>42</sup> *Polk's Diary*, II. 262, 268.

whole cabinet<sup>43</sup> and by leading senators.<sup>44</sup> There followed a 'test of the prerogative' in which Polk appealed to the precedent of Washington's refusal to exhibit the correspondence bearing upon the Jay Treaty. The administration carried the point, and it was not until six months later, when peace had been concluded and the issue over the instructions was dead, that Polk sent them to be embalmed in the customary government documents. He transmitted the proceedings only when "the reason for withholding them . . . no longer exist[ed.]"<sup>45</sup>

A final judgment upon the underlying motive of Slidell's mission must assume that its original purpose was to usher in Manifest Destiny with as little friction as possible. Conditions at the Mexican capital proved such as to render futile any such hope. But Manifest Destiny bides not for men or measures. If peace be unavailing, she uses war. Here the mission served as a burnt offering. Slidell was to be immolated on the altar of his country's wrongs. His importance in this latter aspect has obscured what, it may be said with confidence, was the primary object of his mission, namely to keep the peace.

Whether a success or a failure in itself, the mission forms a most interesting link in that long chain which has bound together the East and the

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, III. 289. January 8, 1848.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, III. 309-310.

<sup>45</sup> *Polk's Diary*, IV. 4.

West, the North and the South of this country. Viewed from the broad standpoint of national advance, Slidell was a press agent of progress. Viewed in the light of personal success, Slidell had broadened an experience which was later to bring him forward as the foremost diplomat of the Confederate States and to secure for him the post of minister to France. Here, again, a web of circumstance was to frustrate the most brilliant efforts, but that is another chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### PROGRESS

WHILE Slidell was still in Mexico, in the interval between the overthrow and the constitution of the two governments with which he attempted to negotiate, Alexander Slidell Mackenzie addressed a communication to Nicholas P. Trist at the state department, full of pride in his brother's opportunities and achievements. "Knowing his energy self possession and ready tact I feel convinced that he will surmount the difficulties that may impede his progress to his destination; and although the new revolution in a country so fruitful of them may be looked on as an untoward event, yet I trust it will only occasion a loss of time without frustrating ultimately the publicly alleged objects of his mission." He observed that no party in Mexico had anything to gain by war, and predicted that revolutionists under pretense of guarding their country's integrity, in reality were motivated only by a greed for the millions offered as the price of that country's dismemberment.<sup>1</sup>

The family solidarity indicated in the preceding letter is further demonstrated by a letter from

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas P. Trist Papers. Library of Congress. Alexander Slidell Mackenzie to Trist. Tarrytown, January 2, 1846.

John Slidell, written shortly after his return from Mexico, to Andrew J. Donelson, nephew to President Jackson, mentioning that "It has always been to me a source of deep regret not to have had some evidence under the hand of our good old chief of his approbation of the cause of my brother in the affair of the Somers. Would you, my dear Sir, have any objection to state what you know on this subject. I intend in a few days to make an appeal to the President for the employment of my brother and such a document would have great weight with him."<sup>2</sup>

Other letters of the summer of 1846 indicate Slidell as interested in more appointments than that of his brother<sup>3</sup> and by no means indifferent to the progress of events in Mexico, whither he stood ready for instant return should the President so ordain.<sup>4</sup> But the order was destined never to come, and for Slidell the permanent result of his mission to Mexico was to consist not in diplomatic reputation, but in a personal friendship destined to affect profoundly his entire subsequent career. One of the most significant friendships in American history grew in fact out of the official relations between the commissioner to Mexico

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J. Donelson Papers. Library of Congress. Slidell to Donelson. Washington, May 13, 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas P. Trist Papers. Library of Congress. Slidell to Trist. Saratoga Springs, New York, July 20, 1846.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Same to Same New York, September 22, 1846.

and the secretary of state to whom his reports were made. The mission itself was a failure. But the conviction on Slidell's part that he had earned the approval and friendship of Buchanan did much from this time on to influence the career of both.

Slidell received written evidence that the administration was mindful of his services. In October, 1846, almost six months after his return from Mexico, Commodore Conner, in command of United States forces in the Gulf of Mexico, was instructed to inform Slidell immediately of any disposition on the part of Mexico to resume negotiations, to the end that Slidell might have leisure to prepare anew for his mission, in advance of more tardy instructions from Washington.<sup>5</sup> And when, in 1847, Slidell formally resigned all connection with the mission, the reply from Buchanan was friendly rather than formal.

Sir:

I have received your despatch of the 26th ultimo, tendering your resignation of the appointment of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Mexican Republic, and have submitted the same to the President.

In answer, I am directed by him to inform you that he will no longer resist your own wishes, and that your resignation is accordingly accepted. He cannot part from you, however, without expressing his obligations for the manner in which, although at the sacrifice of your private interests, you complied with his earnest request to retain

<sup>5</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, VII. 90. October 1, 1846. Buchanan to Com. D. Conner.



your appointment and to hold yourself in readiness to return to Mexico should an opportunity offer within a reasonable time for opening negotiations with the Government of that Republic. This conduct deserves special commendation from the fact that it was wholly disinterested, because whilst acceding to his wishes, you declared you would receive no compensation during the period you should thus be kept in suspense.

I am also instructed by the President to reiterate the assurance that your entire conduct whilst employed upon the mission voluntarily tendered to you, was marked with prudence, firmness, and signal ability under circumstances of uncommon difficulty, and has received his cordial approbation. In all these sentiments of the President it affords me great pleasure to say that I heartily concur.

Your obedient servant,

James Buchanan.<sup>6</sup>

Slidell, for his part, had, meanwhile, come to regard Buchanan as presidential timber. In a letter of April 9, 1846, advising Buchanan to refuse the ermine of the supreme bench, he is already hinting at greater things to come,<sup>7</sup> striking for the first time a note of leadership and guidance, almost of dominance, and constituting himself a political manager for Buchanan. His own less exalted ambition he openly states. "Were I so disposed, I think I might play the Senator for a few weeks to fill Barrow's vacancy, but the position would be a false one and would not advance my prospects for the only object of my ambition, a seat in that body of a more permanent tenure."

<sup>6</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, VII. 211-212. February 9, 1847.

<sup>7</sup> New Orleans, April 9, 1846.

The question arose whether to accept a practically certain election to the lower house or to play for the more alluring but more problematical opening in the senate. On this point, Buchanan's own advice was solicited.<sup>8</sup>

Buchanan apparently dwelt on the hostility felt toward Slidell by certain senators. The latter replied in dismay at the thought of there being several. Upon reflection, he could think of "that miserable imbecile Henry Johnson" and Thomas Hart Benton as his only imaginable enemies, the latter because of some remarks made at the time when Slidell withdrew his support from Van Buren. He entreated Buchanan to name these enemies,<sup>9</sup> and then went on to assure him that neither he nor his friends would feel resentment if the appointment to Mexico should be given to another.

Reminiscent of Mexico, Slidell passed on a choice morsel concerning Calhoun, to the effect that the great nullifier, who had denounced the Slidell mission when it was first projected as "ill-advised and premature," was himself so eager to undertake the mission that he delegated a friend to make overtures for it to Polk, only to learn that Slidell had been previously appointed. The letter containing this Calhoun anecdote further expresses a hope that Buchanan himself will hold the

<sup>8</sup> New Orleans, January 6, 1847.

<sup>9</sup> New Orleans, January 29, 1847.

next mission to Mexico, mentions General Cass respectfully, and intimates that if Pennsylvania could only be brought to relinquish her tariff heresies, Buchanan would be the logical choice of the party in 1848.<sup>10</sup> In November, Slidell is even more specific. He declares that Louisiana Democrats favor a northern man who opposes the Wilmot proviso, and that "a vast majority of our leading politicians look to you as the man of their choice." If Buchanan is to be available in the fullest sense, however, opposition in Pennsylvania must be conciliated, the more so as Walker is by no means friendly to the aspirations of Dallas.<sup>11</sup>

But 1848 was not to realize the hope of either manager or candidate. It was, for Slidell, a troubled year, as his grip on Louisiana itself seemed to be weakening. He failed by a rather narrow margin of obtaining the coveted seat in the senate, his refusal to support Taylor being assigned as the cause. He felt, nevertheless, that, even at the cost of defeat, the effort to avert a Democratic fusion with Whigs was well worth while. He and his friends voted for Soulé, for Slidell was not the man to split his party, whatever might be his eventual attitude toward splitting the Union. But henceforth Slidell was the determined and implacable foe of Soulé for control in Louisiana.<sup>12</sup> Baltimore, moreover, was

<sup>10</sup> New Orleans, March 21, 1847.

<sup>11</sup> New Orleans, November 13, 1847.

<sup>12</sup> New Orleans, February 4, 1848.

no more encouraging than Baton Rouge; the Louisiana vote was divided between Buchanan and Cass. And Slidell, though invited, refused to cast the ballot for the state. As he sorrowfully wrote Buchanan, "I need not tell you how much I feel this, but must bear it with the best grace I may."<sup>13</sup>

The Buchanan papers contain no further communication from Slidell for over a year, though there seems no reason to suppose that the correspondence lapsed for any such length of time. It reopened with a social, rather than political, letter from Tarrytown on the Hudson, mentioning that Slidell and his family were guests of the former's brother-in-law, Commodore Matthew C. Perry, previous to their departure for Saratoga, and urging Buchanan to pay a promised visit to New Orleans in the coming winter.<sup>14</sup>

One of the qualities which distinguished Slidell as a shrewd and able politician was his keen perception that under the increasing strain between the North and the South that candidate stood the best chance of victory who, beyond making it plain that he was "safe," least committed himself on debatable subjects. For that reason, Slidell's attempt to dissuade Buchanan from all thought of the governorship in Pennsylvania deserves quotation at length. It is a searching criticism of

<sup>13</sup> Baltimore, May 22, 1848.

<sup>14</sup> Tarrytown, N. Y., June 23, 1849.

American politics at the time and a revelation of the clear mind of the writer.

I think there are many reasons why for the present you should not voluntarily place yourself in a position where you will be called upon to express your opinions on the subject of slavery in the territories. they are sufficiently well known in the South to make your name acceptable there. & if you abstain from any active participation in the question now, the Free Soilers, who, I am sorry to see, comprise the immense majority of the non-slaveholding states. will when the matter is disposed of entertain no hostility towards anyone, who has not come immediately into conflict with them in the final struggle. you see I have not lost my hopes of yet seeing you in the White House. There is not a man of our party whose chances are as good as yours, & I cannot believe that the Whig party will hold together after the first session of Congress.<sup>15</sup>

Slidell's attitude toward Calhoun has already been indicated. Toward Clay, Whig though he was, he felt a kindlier sentiment, and in August, 1849, he confided to Buchanan that, popular impressions to the contrary, Clay no longer held any presidential aspirations, but that if opportunity arose he would come out against Taylor, whom he unquestionably had in mind in "constantly speaking of the incompatibility of statesmanship and soldiership."<sup>16</sup> In Slidell's opinion, the day of Webster, Clay, and Calhoun was nearing its end. The future belonged not with the 'Elder Statesmen' but with rising stars who could see the mani-

<sup>15</sup> Saratoga Springs, July 25, 1849.

<sup>16</sup> Saratoga Springs, August 11, 1849.

fest destiny of slavery and the necessity of its fulfilment. Thus, almost three years before such a prediction could be put to the test, Slidell informed Buchanan that "The next democratic candidate cannot be Cass neither can he be a free soiler. I do not find with either section any objection to you & I now consider it as certain as any event can be that you are to be our standard bearer."<sup>17</sup> The opportunity to promote the interests of Buchanan was welcomed by Slidell as a selfish gain for himself. By so doing he might be able to slough off an apathy felt for two years past and, through the excitement of the contest, returned to "a tone of mind which I thought I had lost forever."<sup>18</sup>

To elect Buchanan, Slidell felt, would mean to render doubly certain the attainment of Cuba. Accordingly, late in 1849, he visited the island in order to gain impressions at first hand. To this visit he made at the time, however, only a passing allusion. The immediate occasion of a letter from that island was Buchanan's forthcoming visit to New Orleans. With cautious forethought, he raised the question of whether Buchanan would desire a public reception. "You must decide how far it will be advisable to accept or decline any public invitations which might perhaps render it embarrassing to avoid touching upon slave[ry]."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> New York, October 14, 1849.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Havana, December 7, 1849.

The slavery question was pushing on to its temporary solution in the compromise of 1850.<sup>1</sup> And, in view of Slidell's influence in Louisiana, and of his growing weight in national affairs, his attitude toward the crisis was of distinct importance. In February, 1850, he informed Buchanan that when they met, he would have much to say on the subject of Cuba. For the present, however, and "until the present excitement respecting slavery shall have subsided"—he had no hope that it would ever be entirely abated—Cuba would better remain in the background. He then turned to a denunciation of third parties and their dupes, Taylor Democrats in particular, and, while hoping to reclaim the misguided followers, contended that their leaders should be inexorably read out of the party. "They will be much more harmless acting openly with our adversaries than in pretended affiliation with the democracy."<sup>20</sup> He requested of Buchanan information as to political currents at Washington, and declared his own hostility to a convention in the South. An attack on slavery in the District of Columbia would warrant a firm stand, but "I have not considered the passage of the Wilmot Proviso, as sufficient provocation for the extreme and disastrous remedy of separation and it has never been my habit to make declarations which I have not fully intended to carry out to the letter. Pray let me have your advice on the

<sup>20</sup> New Orleans, February 5, 1850.



subject. Perhaps the time has already arrived when it becomes necessary for Southern men to pass the true line of resistance to secure themselves from further aggression."<sup>21</sup>

In the afterlight of history, an inquiry from Slidell to Buchanan as to the timeliness of secession in 1850 has a peculiar interest. Buchanan apparently confirmed Slidell's own views that the *ultima ratio* was uncalled for, and the death of Taylor further encouraged Slidell to hope that "the chances of the settlement of our sectional differences will be improved by Filmore's accession."<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, in the autumn, Slidell continued his labors in Buchanan's behalf. After visiting Buchanan at Lancaster, Slidell urged him to spend some time in New York, where he was frequently mentioned as a more available candidate than General Cass.<sup>23</sup> He stressed the importance of establishing a New York paper pledged to the Buchanan candidacy, for "taking it for granted that you are sure of Pennsylvania, with New York every thing is safe." This notwithstanding the party dissension in Louisiana created by Mr. Soulé which was likely to drive that state into the hands of the Whigs.<sup>24</sup>

By 1851 the national campaign was assuming more definite outlines, and Slidell adopted a dis-

<sup>21</sup> New Orleans, February 5, 1850.

<sup>22</sup> Saratoga Springs, July 13, 1850.

<sup>23</sup> New York, October 9, 1850.

<sup>24</sup> New Orleans, December 16, 1850.

tinctly managerial tone. He assured Buchanan of almost unanimous support from the South but emphasized the New York vote as pivotal. He entreated him to overcome "the dread of locomotion" and to visit Saratoga, the rendezvous of politicians. An understanding with Marcy was of prime importance. The electoral vote of New York would probably go to the Whigs, but they must be kept so busy at home that their power for mischief elsewhere would be shorn. Louisiana was now safe; so, too, the rest of the Southwest. "You are the only man who can unite the conflicting divisions of the Southern democracy. The Whigs will I think carry the State elections this year but we will be all right in November '52." The communication closed with a renewed entreaty to Buchanan to be up and stirring. With a guile not easy to resist, he reminded Buchanan that "Some men under similar circumstances would do better to remain at home. but you (you will not suspect *me* of flattering) can only gain by being seen & known."<sup>25</sup>

Illness in his family almost prevented Slidell's trip North in the summer of 1851. But he did go to Saratoga, and from there he outlined the state of politics as he estimated it. New York, he felt, would cast a Whig ballot, "but thank God we can do without it."<sup>26</sup> Marcy could be counted as a

<sup>25</sup> New Orleans, May 9, 1851.

<sup>26</sup> Saratoga Springs, August 8, 1851.

friend, though the precise extent of assistance to be expected from him might be subject to doubt. Robert J. Walker professed the friendliest sentiments "& yet in spite of myself & with a feeling that I am doing him injustice, I cannot divest myself of a certain degree of distrust." Walker's help Slidell thought really as important as Marcy's, and he strongly recommended that Buchanan exchange views with him. "I consider his advocacy of your nomination all important." Buchanan, it seems, had felt that any attempt by himself as an outsider to influence New York politics might do more harm than good. To Slidell, however, this hands-off policy seemed to have outlived its usefulness. New York being the keystone of the situation, he almost wished himself once more a New Yorker, not that he was vain enough to think his influence so far reaching, "but as things are & possibly will be for several months, a strong will with some tact & discretion could effect a great deal." In this wholly justified and even modest statement, Slidell has left us one of the few self estimates which we have. His was, indeed, a strong will. And if the clearness of his vision and the definiteness of his aims and goals create the impression of a personality controlled more by head than by heart, it can not be denied that he possessed both tact and discretion.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Saratoga Springs, August 8, 1851.

The project of establishing a Buchanan newspaper in New York took shape more definitely on Slidell's arrival in the city. He inquired whether Buchanan would approve General Cushing as editor; he admitted that his integrity was dubious but asserted that his talents were beyond dispute and that self-interest would hold him in line. As to financing the paper, Slidell's nephew, August Belmont, was warmly interested, and "he has already received assurances from a number of the wealthiest merchants of coöperation."<sup>28</sup> Thus 'international bankers' and the money power were early espousing the candidacy of the conservative Buchanan. But Slidell drew a sharp distinction between the wealth which he was able to control and the predatory wealth enlisted in the Douglas interest. "It is confined to one clique not very numerous, but active & unscrupulous, the Ocean mail contractors," at whose head stood the sinister figure of George Law.<sup>29</sup>

Slidell concluded this summary of the situation in New York by hoping that Buchanan had on no account failed to write Marcy.<sup>30</sup> Buchanan, for once, did arouse himself to the "dreaded locomotion" and interviewed Marcy in person. Slidell, who had meanwhile returned to New Orleans, first learned of this through the newspapers and wrote Buchanan in some alarm at his failure to

<sup>28</sup> New York, September 29, 1851.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

learn the details of the interview from his friend, Belmont. It was greatly to be feared that Marcy might decide to enter the race himself. As for Louisiana, the Whigs, as anticipated, were in control of the Legislature, but all would be well when it came to the choosing of delegates for the Baltimore Convention.<sup>31</sup>

But the high water mark of hope for the 1852 nomination had already been reached. New York was pivotal, and New York depended upon Marcy. Marcy, it seemed more and more clear, would be his own candidate, and Slidell indulged in one of the few complaints he ever addressed to Buchanan.

I fear that the favorable moment for action in New York has been irretrievably lost. Marcy was in such a mood last summer that if you had met you would in all probability have secured his active coöperation. he *may* yet have it in his power by a strong effort to turn the scale in your favor. but the chances are that he will not be convinced of the impossibility of his own nomination until too late. If you have however a strong willed & unanimous delegation from Pennsylvania you can do without New York.<sup>32</sup>

Not friendship alone, but a conviction that Buchanan was the moderate best fitted to heal a divided country prompted Slidell to champion the cause. For Slidell, strange as subsequent events make it appear, was himself a moderate. His

<sup>31</sup> New Orleans, November 17, 1851.

<sup>32</sup> New Orleans, December 27, 1851.

position is well stated in a letter to Howell Cobb, of January 28, 1852, in which he takes a decided fling at fire eaters.

“ . . . as to the Rhetts, Yanceys, etc., the sooner and the more effectually we get rid of them the better, and if in the Baltimore convention we adopt a resolution deprecating all modification of the fugitive slave law, it will relieve us at the same time of the Van Burens, Blairs, etc. With such a declaration, I have no doubt of the election of our candidate; but I would infinitely prefer defeat to a victory purchased by truckling to the abolitionists or disunionists. As to the idea of peaceable secession, I consider it one of those harmless follies which can only derive importance from being seriously discussed, and would leave those who entertain it to the quiet enjoyment of the abstraction. . . . While I have strong preferences for Mr. Buchanan, as well on account of personal intimacy as of my conviction of his superior fitness and availability, I need scarcely say that I have still more at heart the reorganization of our party on sound principles, and that if such a consummation can be more surely attained by another nomination I am prepared to sustain it, and that whoever may be the candidate, he will have my cordial support. I say whoever may be the candidate because I feel sure that only a sound Union Democrat can by any possibility be nominated at Baltimore.<sup>33</sup>

Douglas, it would seem, was not included by Slidell as “a sound Union Democrat” upon whom the nomination might possibly alight, for in letters to Buchanan, written in February and March of 1852 and discriminating among the rivals for

<sup>33</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Toombs, Stephens, Cobb, Correspondence*, Slidell to Cobb. New Orleans, January 28, 1852.

honors, Slidell made much the same distinction between Cass and Douglas that Sumner later drew between them.<sup>34</sup> He found an unexpected strength lined up for Cass, drawn from "sound, reliable men who have only at heart the triumph of their principles," whereas the advocates of Douglas were for the most part "trading politicians & adventurers, with a very slight sprinkling of well meaning men who think it for the interest of the party to cast off old leaders & select a chief from the young democracy." To Slidell it was no recommendation for Douglas that Soulé should have enlisted under his banner.<sup>35</sup> And the purchase by Douglas partisans of the New Orleans *Delta* and four country papers in Louisiana alone indicated to Slidell a strong campaign chest in the North. "If such men as have originated the Douglas movement could succeed in imposing him upon us as the nominee of the great democratic party, I should despair of the republic & although I shall be *cautious* in expressing such an opinion, no consideration could induce me to support him." To Cass on the contrary, in spite of serious doubts whether he could be elected, Slidell would extend an "honest support." He would do as much for Butler, Marcy, or others, "but I still entertain the hope, which indeed all my letters from Washing-

<sup>34</sup> A. C. McLaughlin, *Lewis Cass*, pp. 319-320.

<sup>35</sup> New Orleans, February 26, 1852.



ton warrant, that you will obtain the nomination, when I can go into the camp *con amore*." In Virginia Douglas seemed to be the only serious competitor, and in Georgia, by Cobb's account, Buchanan was the strongest candidate, though Cobb's own good will was subject to doubt.<sup>36</sup>

The next mention of Douglas was more friendly, due to Slidell's growing conviction that his following in Louisiana was less menacing than had been at first supposed, the Douglas men preferring Buchanan to Cass and being likely, after the first ballot, to vote accordingly unless overruled by Douglas himself. Meanwhile, Buchanan occupied a similar position with the followers of Cass, who were grateful for his moral support against Douglas. But predictions were idle until it should be known who were to be the delegates at Baltimore. If Buchanan approved, Slidell would himself go to Baltimore, as Belmont wished it decidedly, and he really might be able to bring some final pressure on the wavering Marcy.<sup>37</sup>

How chimerical was this notion of converting Marcy into a Buchanan lieutenant one perceives in a letter of John N. L. Pruyn to Marcy from Washington at this very time, May, 1852. Pruyn was a New Yorker who had been scouting for his chief. The report follows: "—Rowley of La says

<sup>36</sup> New Orleans, March 19, 1852.

<sup>37</sup> New Orleans, April 15, 1852.

that when he reached home last fall, he found matters so far advanced, that it was too late to do anything for you there—Butler's Delegation will not probably remain for Cass very long, and if not, I hope some of them will come on later to you."<sup>38</sup>

Following a more practical line of attack, Slidell reminded Buchanan that the Whigs were attacking his slavery record by accusing him of opposing, previous to the compromise of 1820, the admission of Missouri as a slave state. Slidell considered this a venial sin, if committed, and one long since atoned for by Buchanan's priority over all other northern men, Democrats or Whigs, in the defence of southern rights. But he was under an impression that somewhere he had seen the Missouri story denied, and if the facts warranted it, he thought it would be advisable for Buchanan to refute it officially. He repeated his alarm for Louisiana if Filmore should be the Whig nominee.<sup>39</sup>

A month later, and the high hopes built on years of planning were dashed. Their obituary may be quoted in full, for the intimate picture it gives of the aims, motives, and scruples of Slidell as a politician.

<sup>38</sup> New Orleans, May 22, 1852.

<sup>39</sup> William L. Marcy Papers. Library of Congress. Folio 24. John N. L. Pruyn to W. L. Marcy, Washington, May 28, 1852.

New Orleans, 23 June, 1852.

My dear Mr. Buchanan,

I will not attempt to express to you all the annoyance & mortification I have felt at your not having obtained the nomination at Baltimore. It is the only political question in which for several years I have felt any warm interest. my faith in our political principles has never for a moment been shaken. but various reasons had combined to make any active interposition in party struggles irksome & distasteful to me. I believe that had it not been for the hope that I might in some feeble degree contribute to your nomination my retirement from the political arena would have been permanent & complete. I should have confined myself to depositing an unmixed democratic vote at every important election. If Cass had been nominated he could have had my vote & pecuniary contribution, with little anxiety & still less hope for his success. as to Douglas, Houston, Lane or any man of that stamp, as I should have considered success with such men, as more disastrous to the permanent interests of the party than their defeat, I should not have voted at all. At one time, I could have cordially supported Marcy, as my second choice, but his weakness in yielding to the spurious & artificial excitement gotten up in favor of Kossuth & intervention shook my faith entirely in his judgment but his political integrity & the course of his friends at Baltimore, who by well timed interposition could have secured your nomination, has entirely changed my feelings towards him—As it is, I am as well satisfied with the choice of the convention as I could possibly be with any result short of your nomination & I shall heartily support Pierce & King] without feeling any particular enthusiasm. I shall do everything in my power to aid in carrying the vote of Louisiana which I think we have more than equal chance of doing. With Fillmore opposed to us, I should have hoped for success, without counting on it very confidently.

Mrs. Slidell has written you a note which I enclose. I trust that we shall meet at Saratoga or some where this summer. We leave here for New York by the river about

3 to 4 July. our journey will probably not be longer than 10 days. Pray let us hear from you care of Belmont, who, I believe, is almost as much annoyed at your defeat as any of us.

Believe me ever faithfully & respy

Your friend etc

John Slidell.

Honl. James Buchanan,  
Wheatland.<sup>40</sup>

The analytical and philosophical manner in which Buchanan viewed his own defeat found interesting expression in what amounted to a letter of condolence to Marcy, a fellow victim with himself.

My dear Sir:

I have received your favor of the 6th Instant. There is but one thing in which all my friends North, South, East and West agree in giving me the proceedings of the Convention; & that is that if your friends in the New York Delegation, or any respectable number of them had voted for me, I should have been nominated, or failing in this, you would have been the successful candidate. One or other of these results was completely within the power of our friends. I knew from the beginning that my friends, if they could not nominate me could control the nomination. You were my preference & this was known; but my friends, in the ardor of the contest, got their feelings so excited as to place you out of the question. Perhaps this is best for us both. I am entirely satisfied, with the nomination of Pierce & King, tho I greatly preferred you to the former. We are now both shelved, & it is my ardent desire that we should continue good friends as long as we both shall live.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> New Orleans, June 23, 1852.

<sup>41</sup> Wm. L. Marcy Papers in the Library of Congress. James Buchanan to Wm. L. Marcy, June 10, 1852.

Events were to demonstrate that the optimistic calculations thus temporarily set back were based on a sound analysis of political trends, and, with an energy no whit abated, Slidell laid his plans for the next convention. His correspondence for the next year or two reveals the same keen and incisive estimate of men and events, and, as the Cincinnati convention drew near, it becomes a definite source for the history of the times.

The summer following his disappointment at Baltimore Slidell spent at Saratoga, carefully avoiding Newport with its temperance legislation because of his "horror of despotism in every shape" and of his reluctance, in spite of his belief that the law was a dead letter, to place himself "within the jurisdiction of a state where so tyrannical a system exists."<sup>42</sup> Contact with northern politics confirmed his impression that the Whig party was moribund. "It may be galvanised for the moment into a show of activity, but after a few short convulsive struggles it will be definitely numbered among the things that were." But, with a blindness to the implications of his own prophecy rare in this astute observer, he declares that "It will of course be revived under some other organization & probably with a new name, when we shall I hope slough off some of our own rotten-

<sup>42</sup> Saratoga, July 28, 1852.

ness to be absorbed by the force of natural affinities into the Seward and Hale faction."<sup>43</sup>

Victory at the polls was followed by the usual rush of applications for place under the incoming administration. One of these, of unquestionable interest to Slidell, was the candidacy of his niece's husband, August Belmont, for a diplomatic post, preferably at Naples. Slidell did not act directly in this manner, but among several recommendations addressed to Marcy, the incoming secretary of state, and written chiefly by friends of Belmont in New York, was one from Buchanan which undoubtedly expressed the desire of his friend. "I, also, feel much interest in the appointment of Belmont to Naples. If you desire to acquire Cuba in a peaceful manner, the President ought to select able and accomplished ministers to Naples, Spain, England and France who would cordially work together & Belmont would contribute his full share of influence."<sup>44</sup>

While Belmont was thus exerting every influence for a position which he failed to secure,<sup>45</sup> Democrats no less distinguished than General Cass were discussing Slidell also as strong timber for Pierce's cabinet. Upon learning of this, Slidell expressed as much surprise as pleasure and attributed it to anxiety "to prevent the secession-

<sup>43</sup> New York, September 15, 1852.

<sup>44</sup> Wm. L. Marcy Papers. Library of Congress. Folio 29. James Buchanan to Wm. L. Marcy, Wheatland, March 8, 1853.

<sup>45</sup> Eventually, however, he was sent to Holland.

ists with Soulé at their head from acquiring supremacy," and to a conviction that Slidell was "the most available Union man in the States south of Virginia."<sup>46</sup>

If this cabinet appointment did awaken any hopes and subsequent disappointments, these were nothing to the surprise which Slidell felt at Pierce's failure to offer the state department to Buchanan. While the cabinet decisions were pending Buchanan apparently suggested to Slidell the advisability of going to Washington. To this he demurred on the ground that a cabinet post, now very unlikely to be offered, would be undesirable if it meant close social and political relations with such men as Hunter and Nicholson, who, it was understood, would be members and on whom Slidell placed a very low estimate. "If the rest of the cabinet be proportionately weak, I should have little hope of its duration or of its being long enabled to command majorities in Congress." Under such circumstances, a foreign mission would be more desirable than a cabinet appointment. But, if men like Buchanan were being ignored in the framing of the new government, there was scant likelihood that those in control of events would view Slidell's pretensions with favor. On the whole, Slidell's chief causes for satisfaction lay close at home, where his wing

<sup>46</sup> New York, September 27, 1852.



of the Democracy was strongly in the ascendant over Soulé."<sup>47</sup>

Discussion of cabinet possibilities continued until the results were finally known. But by January 21, 1853, Slidell had pretty well made up his mind not to accept what would probably not be offered, on the basis that "If the Department of State is to be offered to & refused by men of Mr. Hunter's calibre & questionable political orthodoxy, I do not feel very ambitious for a post in the cabinet."<sup>48</sup> In February he professed the utmost chagrin that Buchanan should have exposed himself to discourtesy and rebuff on his behalf. "But I look upon this incident in a still more serious light. it is to my mind a very pregnant indication that sudden & unexpected elevation to so dizzy a height has had its usual bewildering effect."<sup>49</sup>

Whether or not Slidell liked Pierce and political prospects under an administration which he already viewed with gloomy forebodings, the question of patronage could not be ignored, and in a very frank letter to Marcy, the secretary of state, Slidell set forth the true inwardness of Louisiana politics and his own claim to recognition where the patronage was concerned.

<sup>47</sup> New Orleans, December 31, 1852.

<sup>48</sup> New Orleans, January 21, 1853.

<sup>49</sup> New Orleans, February 13, 1852.

New Orleans, 10 March, 1853.

My dear Sir,

I feel a deep interest in the success of the application of my friend Penn, for the Collectorship of this place. I do not write to the President on the subject for two reasons, first that I have no cause to believe that my recommendation would have any weight with him, next that as I have not the advantage of his personal acquaintance, I could not with propriety allude to questions of local politics, which enter largely into the consideration of an appointment so important as that of Collector of New Orleans. I understand that his most formidable competitor is Doctor Mercier, a brother in law of Senator Soulé. Mr. Lasen is in Washington, you know him well and I believe have confidence in him. He will explain to you what is the relative strength of parties here (I speak now of divisions in our own ranks) & where the sound and reliable influence with the democracy is to be found. This, as he will tell you, is not a matter of surmise or conjecture. We have recently had a trial of strength in our primary and regular elections & the nullity, (I am not using an exaggerated expression) of the Soulé party has been demonstrated beyond the possibility of a doubt. Mr. Soulés friends were no where in our nominating convention & after the nominations, they, headed by Doctor Mercier, strenuously exerted themselves to defeat two of our Senatorial ticket, Messrs Lewis & King, but both those gentlemen were elected by 1200 majority, Lewis being second & King third on the ticket. All the Senators were my personal & political friends, but these two gentlemen were especially the objects of the impotent malice of the Soulé faction [were the] senatorial election to come off tomorrow, I should in a democratic legislative caucus receive at least five votes to one against Soulé. I do not enter into further details, but refer you to Lasen who can place you in possession of all the particulars of our local divisions. He will satisfy you that Doctor Mercier's appointment will insure the defeat of our party at the

next election. As to Mr. Penns qualifications, I can only say that he is a man of sound judgment, admirable business habits, & incorruptible integrity. A decided but calm & discreet man in politics his official patronage will be builded in the manner best calculated to promote the permanent interests of the party & to secure the continuance of our present ascendancy in the legislature. I am little in the habit of speaking of my own party services, you may hear of them from others, but I may at least venture to say that they entitle me to be heard in a question of this nature.

If you can aid Mr. Penn, you will confer a signal favor on,  
My dear Sir,

Your friend & servant

John Slidell.

Honl. W. L. Marcy

Etc. Etc.

Washington.<sup>50</sup>

It was in truth no more than natural that Pierce should hold at arm's length his most formidable rival and that rival's lieutenant, but to ignore them entirely was not feasible. Buchanan was eventually offered the mission to the Court of St. James, an appointment upon which he made a suggestive memorandum to the effect that an interview with Jefferson Davis, "sought for the purpose of benefiting my friend, John Slidell, who was then a candidate for the Senate, has doubtless been the cause why I was nominated and confirmed as minister to England on the next day."<sup>51</sup> Slidell, for his part, was nominated for the mission to

<sup>50</sup> William L. Marcy Papers. Library of Congress. Slidell to Marcy. New Orleans, March 10, 1853.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, IX. 15. July 12, 1853.

Central America, a compliment which he professed to appreciate,<sup>52</sup> but which he did not accept, preferring a mission to London for the sale of railroad bonds to a diplomatic mission in Central America.

On the eve of sailing, Slidell drafted a short letter to Buchanan which reveals a rather curious insensibility to the proper relations between public and private business. Buchanan could not be in London at the same time with Slidell, who laments: "I had anticipated great satisfaction from meeting you in London not altogether unmixed with a selfish feeling that your presence might aid Mr. Robb and me in conducting our negotiation for the sale of Rail Road bonds."<sup>53</sup> It should be said to the credit of Slidell, however, that the difficulties in his path were such as to demand every assistance available, for the company which he represented, the New Orleans and Nashville railroad company, traversed the state of Mississippi and so required a Mississippi charter, which, in view of their former dealings with Mississippi industries and governments, was in itself a warning to capitalists to shun the investment. It was, in fact, one of Slidell's major tasks to demonstrate that he represented primarily a Louisiana and not a Mississippi corporation.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> New Orleans, March 30, and May 27, 1853.

<sup>53</sup> New York, June 28, 1853.

<sup>54</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, August 5, 1853. Quoting extract from New York, July 18, 1853.

The death of Senator Barrow and the transfer of Soulé to the Spanish mission at last cleared the way for the realization of Slidell's great ambition, long ago confided to Buchanan. Upon his return from Europe he promptly entered upon his coveted position in the United States senate. He was regarded as an accession to the moderates, and the comment made by George W. Jones of Tennessee in a letter to Howell Cobb of Georgia respecting the new senator from Louisiana fairly well states the case. "Slidell for Soulé in the Senate is certainly not a bad change. . . . I am not certain but that it is better to have these ultra men North and South in under executive appointments than in legislative positions—particularly if the President be right."<sup>55</sup>

Slidell and Buchanan were moving rapidly towards the goal which they had set. Buchanan, though at a distance, was safe in the guardianship of Slidell, and the new-fledged senator had himself a spacious stage for action.

<sup>55</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb*, p. 327. Jones to Cobb, May 19, 1853.

## CHAPTER V

IN THE SENATE 1853 TO 1857

AS a senator Slidell found himself plunged into the midst of great affairs. During the early months of 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill held the focus of attention, only to yield to the Cuban agitation and the Ostend Manifesto. In the latter of these Slidell was vitally concerned, while even in the former he seems to have exerted some influence, especially in connection with the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Galusha A. Grow, a participant in the discussion, is authority for the statement that, "In the interval between the reporting of the original bill and the substitute, Senator Douglas, Senator Slidell, and myself dined at the home of James Campbell, of Pennsylvania, who was Pierce's Postmaster-General. After dinner Douglas and Slidell entered into a lively conversation during which the latter in a very earnest manner said, 'Douglas, you ought to make one Territory and repeal the Missouri Compromise'."<sup>1</sup>

It is anecdotes like this of Grow's which, though all too few have survived, indicate the real influ-

<sup>1</sup> James T. Dubois and Gertrude S. Mathews, *Galusha A. Grow*. (Boston, 1917), p. 138.

ence of Slidell as a legislator. In this respect his senatorial career duplicated his experience in the lower house. The official record is largely formal. Slidell is revealed as attentive to detail though indifferent to the laurels of the forum. But the detail work has a significance of its own. Solicitude over the confirmation of land titles<sup>2</sup> and over land grants for railroad construction,<sup>3</sup> advocacy of a naval station near New Orleans,<sup>4</sup> the pushing of claims of individual constituents<sup>5</sup> were only in part routine. Slidell took a lively personal interest in the developing railway system of the country. Doubtless, also, his own interest was enlisted in the case of the petition which he presented of United States naval and marine officers stationed in the Gulf during the Mexican War, and more recently transferred to Japanese waters, "to be placed upon the same footing as those who served on the coast of California and Mexico during the war."<sup>6</sup> Nor is it necessary to ascribe this to nepotism and a brotherly devotion to his sister's husband, the commander of the squadron. The navy and its welfare were an abiding interest with Slidell.

<sup>2</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 1, p. 66, December 20, 1853; also p. 186, January 17, 1854.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73, December 21, 1853, and p. 14, January 7, 1854.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81, December 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 1, p. 200. January 18, 1854, and *Ibid.*, p. 203, January 19, 1854.

<sup>6</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 1, p. 239. January 24, 1854.



It will be remembered that, as a member of the lower house, Slidell submitted a resolution for increasing state control over the judiciary, also a constitutional amendment concerning the election of presidents. He carried the same legalistic enterprise into the senate, and, in a resolution to amend its rules so as to remove the injunction of secrecy covering senate action on nominations submitted for confirmation, he placed himself in harmony with a more recent enthusiasm for "open covenants openly arrived at."<sup>7</sup> With Slidell it was less a question of theory than of practice. Secrecy was constantly betrayed. Better, then, abandon the farce.

That Slidell, even on an issue of local improvements, was capable of taking a national viewpoint, appeared in the handling of a bill for removing obstructions to the Mississippi at Southwest Pass and Pass à l'Outré. The bill was in charge of Judah P. Benjamin with Slidell in support. It was opposed by Stewart of Michigan and Bell of Tennessee, who favored a general rivers and harbors policy rather than a host of individual bills. Benjamin and Slidell concurred in the desirability of withdrawing their bill.<sup>8</sup>

The happiness which Slidell derived from his life in the senate is apparent in the tone of his

<sup>7</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session. XXVIII. Pt. 1, p. 303. February 1, 1854.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448. February 20, 1854.

correspondence with Buchanan. He even indulged in a number of witticisms, rare for him, at Buchanan's adventure in going to Buckingham Palace in the costume of a plain American citizen.

→ Secretary Marcy's attempt to advertise American simplicity complicated the situation of American diplomatic agents. Slidell congratulated Buchanan on his single blessedness. "To what unheard of contumelies & injuries might you not have been exposed had the additional responsibility of Mrs. B——'s costume been thrown upon you, and then although we Louisianians may fight strangers with impunity what would have become of you from the Quaker State if you had attempted to avenge in the blood of the critic any commentary upon the taste of your better half."<sup>9</sup>

Turning, in the same letter, to more serious aspects of the political scene, Slidell finds much dissatisfaction at the course pursued by the administration toward the rival factions, Hunkers and Barnburners, in New York. An intervention, regrettable under any circumstances, was particularly inept when directed in behalf of the wrong side and betrayed a gross ignorance of the state of public opinion. More serious even than this was Pierce's failure to win dignity and strength for his administration through the selection of a strong cabinet. "This is a much more important element of success than is generally

<sup>9</sup> Washington, January 14, 1854.

supposed & Pierce will yet in all probability feel the want of it." In fact, lacking the personal support of the leaders of his party, Pierce could count upon merely a formal allegiance to a titular head, for "there is probably not a member of the Senate, who does not consider his own individual opinion in every other respect entitled to quite as much consideration as that of the President. in other words he is the *de jure* not the *de facto* head of the party." On top of it all, Pierce is a weak man ruled by two members of his cabinet, or rather one now, for Slidell thinks that Jefferson Davis has fallen into some disfavor because of his announced desire to abandon the President and return to the senate. With such a heavy budget on his part, Slidell begs in return that Buchanan will inform him how the diplomatic corps at London regards Soulé and his duels.<sup>10</sup>

In view of the political intimacy which this correspondence reveals, it would be surprising if Slidell had taken no part in the movement leading to the Ostend Manifesto. His interest in Cuba has already been noted, and, soon after Buchanan entered upon his duties in London, the Cuban situation underwent a phase peculiarly alarming to southerners and annexationists. Slidell, with many others, was convinced that Great Britain and France were in a plot to "Africanize" Cuba, even converting it into a Black Republic rather

<sup>10</sup> Washington, January 14, 1854.

than see it fall into American hands; this, of course, presupposing Spain's own inability to retain possession. He suggested that Belmont, then minister at the Hague, through his powerful connections at Madrid, might be in position to secure for Buchanan authentic information as to the existence and nature of these engagements. And, when he hinted that the \$15,000,000 designed for Santa Anna in Mexico might be required "in expenditures of more urgent necessity," he had in mind possible contingencies in Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

Not long after writing this letter to Buchanan, Slidell's intense interest in the subject there touched upon caused him to deliver one of his few formal addresses in the senate. His text was the necessity for action. In the curt condensation of the congressional reporter its essence follows:

Some months since, Mr. President, I was as skeptical as any one on this floor could be about the existence of any concerted plan to Africanize Cuba. I use the word, not for the reason that it has become fashionable, but because it plainly conveys, to my mind at least, without periphrasis, the complex ideas of emancipation, confiscation, pillage, murder, devastation and barbarism. Past experience has led me to be surprised at nothing that England might attempt to prevent the possession of this magnificent island by her great commercial rival, a rival destined to be, in a very few years, if, in fact, she be not already, in that respect, her recognized superior. Still, I could not bring myself to believe that Spain, with all her pride and obstinacy, would prefer the destruction of a flourishing colony, peopled by her own sons, to the pros-

<sup>11</sup> Washington, March 25, 1854.

pect of its transfer, at some future, perhaps distant day, by honorable and peaceful negotiation, to a friendly nation, for a price that would extricate her finances from that gulf of seemingly hopeless bankruptcy in which they have been so long plunged.

Asking the further indulgence of the senate, Slidell undertook to trace the growth of a tripartite agreement of Spain, England, and France "to renounce, both now and hereafter, all intention to obtain possession of the Island of Cuba, and to discountenance all attempts to that effect on the part of others," as announced by the British secretary of state for foreign affairs on April 8, 1852. No reply to this having been made by Mr. Webster, it devolved upon his successor, Mr. Everett, who satisfied even so sensitive a critic as Slidell by "a paper which will be forever remarkable in our diplomatic history, for its high-toned nationality, and a vigor of style corresponding with the importance of the question." The speech closed with an elaborate explanation of British plans to encourage abolition, or a slave uprising against the Cuban creoles, an indictment of the "apprentice" system, and a conclusion that Great Britain and France are united, so far as this hemisphere is concerned, for nothing more definitely than to cut America from Cuban aspirations, even at the cost of another Black Republic like Haiti.<sup>12</sup> Such being the case, any auditor might

<sup>12</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 2, p. 1021. May 1, 1854.

at once perceive America's duty to be as plain as *Delenda est Carthago*.

In transmitting to Buchanan a corrected copy of this speech, Slidell asks, subject to "all proper reservations," for additional information on the subject, as well as for a more precise statement of what Buchanan meant in his Elgin dinner speech by saying that "if we were engaged in war we should abstain from commissioning private armed vessels unless national vessels of the enemy were inhibited from capturing our merchant vessels."<sup>13</sup>

So long as Cuba remained the focus of diplomatic interest Slidell kept in close touch with the state department, urging upon Marcy the need of frequent reports from and to the ministers at London and Paris. When Marcy admitted the wisdom of such a course, Slidell remarked that this change of policy might be due to the secretary's own reflections, or again that it might have been suggested by the President, "on whom I have more than once urged the absolute necessity of bringing your [Buchanan's] influence & that of Mason & Belmont to bear upon our negotiations at Madrid—Things may yet take such a turn as to render the Russian legation at Madrid a very useful auxiliary."<sup>14</sup>

Eager as Slidell was to advance the cause, he felt no inclination to be a catspaw for the Pierce

<sup>13</sup> Washington, May 4, 1854.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, June 17, 1854.

administration. He participated with Mason, Douglas, Davis, and two others in a White House conference held early in June at which he urged upon Pierce a message to Congress so worded "as to satisfy our people in New Orleans that he was prepared to pursue an energetic policy & thus induce them to abstain from any hostile expedition." When Pierce attempted to evade personal responsibility for such a course by suggesting that Slidell himself telegraph the district attorney at New Orleans that "immediate & decisive measures would be taken in relation to Cuba," he peremptorily refused, on the very proper ground that such a notice must be on all accounts an official act of the state department. Marcy was instructed accordingly. But a recess afforded excuse for delay, and Slidell was increasingly convinced that the President would never take the promised action, the more so as his general vacillation was a subject of general comment in both houses of Congress.<sup>15</sup>

However shifting or shifty the administration, Slidell was not the man to cease pressing a point so near to his heart. A passage in his next letter to Buchanan strongly suggests that he was a moving force behind the Manifesto. "The idea now is to have you, Soulé & Mason to meet for the purpose of consultation. I have suggested that on account of the Rothschild influence, at Madrid & Paris, it would be well that Belmont be brought

<sup>15</sup> Washington, June 17, 1854.



either personally or by correspondence into your counsels." Such activity on the part of a senator who was scarcely of the President's immediate household of faith may well have seemed officious. And relations between Slidell and Marcy became somewhat tense.<sup>16</sup>

While Cuba was at this period the dominant interest of Slidell, a nice problem in the responsibilities of a senator toward his state also claimed consideration. The legislature of Louisiana specifically instructed the senators and requested the representatives of the state in Congress to work for "a bill granting to the State of Louisiana four townships of land for the education of the deaf and dumb, and three townships for the education of the blind." A mandate of this sort in no way conflicted with Slidell's views on constitutional theory. As he expressed it, "I should, with the opinions I entertain of the right of the Legislature to instruct, and of the correlative duty of Senators to obey, have felt myself bound to sustain it by my vote, if it simply provided for grants of lands to the States for the benevolent purposes which it specifies." Unfortunately, however, the bill as drafted provided for minute supervision by the United States government of the state institu-

<sup>16</sup> August 6, 1854. Correspondence in the Marcy Papers, Library of Congress, of May and June, 1855, indicates that Marcy, for his part, deeply regretted and at the same time resented, the alienation of Slidell. Marcy to R. Withers, May 27, 1855, and Withers to Marcy, June 7, 1855.

tions to be benefited, especially in the matter of rendering account of sales and scrip. "This obligation of periodical accountability is at war with all the views I entertain of the proper relations that should exist between sovereign states and the Federal Government; and I cannot vote for any bill in which provisions so derogatory to the dignity of the States shall be retained. I feel confident that the Legislature of Louisiana would repudiate any grant that sought to impose such an accountability."<sup>17</sup> A suggestive instance, this, of the sincerity of Slidell's states-rights convictions, divorced of all connection with slavery.

During the summer of 1854 Slidell found himself in friendly opposition with Stuart of Michigan, in hostile with Jones of Tennessee. Stuart was sponsor for a bill making it easier for aliens to acquire government land. Slidell opposed it on the ground that citizens, not aliens, had a prior lien on government munificence, and aliens would do well to announce their intention to become citizens.<sup>18</sup> With Jones, feeling was less friendly. In a passage between the two men the repartee was sharp. The dispute concerned contracts for mail delivery. Jones desired better and more expensive service.

<sup>17</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 3, pp. 1620, 1621. July 6, 1854.

<sup>18</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 3, p. 1749. July 14, 1854.

Mr. Jones, of Tennessee: I should like to ask the Senator from Louisiana, who undertakes to state what facilities we have, to tell me how often we get mails at Memphis from St. Louis and Nashville.

Mr. Slidell: I really cannot answer that question.

Mr. Jones, of Tennessee: That is just as I supposed; the Senator does not know anything about it.

Mr. Slidell: I do not think my admission went so far. I may, perhaps, not have that very accurate information which the Senator possesses on this and all other subjects; but I think I do know something about it. I hope he will correct the remark he has just made. I am not in the habit of stating anything of which I know nothing.

Mr. Jones, of Tennessee: I am willing to concede to the Senator from Louisiana superior intelligence on every subject except this; but I understood him to say that the Postmaster General, for an expenditure of \$80,000 or \$90,000 a year, has as good mail service as he could have obtained at \$290,000 under the law.<sup>19</sup>

With that the issue lapsed into the commonplace.

Familiarity with the Pierce administration bred no respect in the mind of Slidell. He unburdened himself to Buchanan in numerous complaints at the government's failure to command the respect of its own partisans. For the failure of negotiations for Cuba and the futility of the Ostend Manifesto he blamed neither Spain nor Buchanan but Pierce. He asked for "such details about your conference with Mason & Soulé as you may choose to communicate confidentially, although I have not now the least hope of acquiring

<sup>19</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII. Pt. 3, p. 2091. August 2, 1854.

Cuba under this administration.”<sup>20</sup> This being the case, all that remained was to plan so carefully for the next administration that the Baltimore disappointment should not be repeated. He warned Buchanan, who had grown weary of his mission, not to resign prematurely and by a return to America to surrender the advantage of silence on critical issues. “The political atmosphere is malarious (if there be no such word there should be) & those who are not compelled to inhale it had better keep away.”<sup>21</sup> Credit is due the sagacity which could thus condense all the essentials for success.

Meanwhile, Slidell looked to his own fences, returning to the senate with little difficulty,<sup>22</sup> where he remained loyal to Buchanan. A letter of April 3, 1855, attests that he placed upon Buchanan no responsibility whatever for the fiasco at Ostend.

New Orleans, 3 April, 1855.

My dear Mr. Buchanan:

I wrote you a few hurried lines shortly after the adjournment of Congress. Since then I have read with great pleasure your Ostend manifesto. I say yours, for I think it carries with it internal evidence of its being the product of your sound judgment & practised pen. It has my unqualified approbation both as to form & substance. The only fault that can justly be found with the proceedings is one for which you are not responsible, the unnec-

<sup>20</sup> New York, October 18, 1854.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Washington, March 3, 1855.

essary formality of your meeting and the publicity given to its objects. You were right in your objections to the mode and place of meeting, & I deeply regret that you did not insist upon them. You might have met at Paris or London without any suspicion of your object, or what would have been still better, might have fully interchanged views by correspondence. One thing has struck me as perhaps giving a certain vantage ground to Marcy. It is this—that he seems, so far as I can judge from the published documents, only to invite you to confer about the best means of promoting the acquisition of Cuba by purchase, while you have reviewed the whole question of policy & suggested the possibility of recourse being had to measures of coercion. But as Marcy has not availed himself of this objection, it is probable that good reasons exist for his abstinence, in the papers that have not yet been given to the public. As to Marcy's course I think that I can very readily account for it. His every thought is directed toward the Presidency, & he fancies that he sees in you the only obstacle to the realisation of his dreams. On this subject he is morbidly susceptible, & is constantly suspecting some deep laid scheme to supplant him. Poor man! if every one whose name has ever been mentioned in connection with the Presidency were translated to another world, I do not believe that he could obtain the vote of a solitary State for his nomination. Rumor is rife, probably without any foundation, that he will leave the Cabinet. On this score, I am entirely indifferent, for I have no hope that any change can restore to the President the lost confidence of the party. Say what they will of Nebraska and Know-Nothingism, the personal unpopularity or rather the total want of consideration and influence of the administration has been the chief cause of our reverses. The mass of the party is as sound as ever, but no confidence is reposed in its nominal chief, & a party without a head is doomed to as certain destruction, as an army without a general. I have written you a very gloomy letter. Perhaps a shocking cold under which I have been laboring since the adjournment of Congress may have its

influence on the view I take of our political future, but I confess that I cannot see anything encouraging in the perspective. My family are all well. the climate of Louisiana seems to agree with them much better than that of Washington, but as I cannot make up mind to be separated from them for many months at a time, we must run the risk of northern winters. Mrs. S. feels very sensibly the sacrifice of our comfortable home, which we cannot replace at Washington, but as a good wife submits with the best grace she can to what is unavoidable. She begs to be remembered to you. We will leave here in June, pass a few weeks in Washington, & then go to Newport. When do you intend returning home? Believe me ever faithfully  
Your friend

John Slidell.

Hon. James Buchanan,  
London.<sup>23</sup>

This consolation as to the Manifesto was followed in June by a letter of gossip, very entertaining in its survey of events. To begin with, Slidell was "for the present at least & possibly forever" at outs with Pierce and Marcy. Pierce would probably be quite willing to accept Buchanan's resignation; Marcy might like the post; but to take it would seem like a retiring under fire. Soulé, back from a ridiculous failure in Spain, was out for Marcy's scalp, and the secretary must stand his ground. Rumor had it that Soulé meant to challenge Marcy. "Will this not be a capital farce. I look forward to the denouement as a rich treat." Marcy was probably leading him on and at the proper moment would pounce on him "à

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, IX. 332. April 3, 1855.

la Scott." for, given time and preparation, Marcy with pen in hand was a dangerous customer. Slidell has not time to explain in detail his own break with Pierce, but in substance it was due to "repeated violations of his word which can only be explained by the most reckless indifference to truth or deliberate treachery."<sup>24</sup>

In the more general field of politics, Slidell thought it surprising that the people at Newport, where he was sojourning, felt far more interest in Sebastopol and the Crimea than in Kansas and Know-Nothingism. But, in so far as the parties were lining up for the contest, the Democracy could count on the more intelligent and wealthy Whigs, whom disgust at "the results of their truckling to negrophilism & the other cant of the day" was driving into "the true conservative party of the country." Even so, it might be too late to remedy the situation, and Slidell, intent upon nominating his friend to the presidency of a united country, already sounds the note of dissolution. Almost the key-note of Buchanan's term of office is Slidell's prophetic declaration that "trustful as I have hitherto been of the perpetuity of the Union I begin to look forward to a dissolution as a not very remote possibility. The question will be solved one way or the other during the next Presidential term. how different would

<sup>24</sup> Washington, June 17, 1855.



have been our position had you received the nomination at Baltimore.”<sup>25</sup>

A Democratic triumph in Pennsylvania with “every issue fairly met & the glove thrown down to all the isms combined” served notice that victory would be certain in 1856.<sup>26</sup> And Buchanan might rest assured that absence was not injuring his cause. “The old adage that ‘les absents ont toujours tort’ will not be verified in your case. the *people* are taking care of you and the almost universal admission by *politicians* here from every part of the country that you are the only man for the crisis, is an unmistakable indication of the force & depth of the popular current.” The time had come, however, when Buchanan must express his obedience to the will of the sovereign people. Too rigid insistence that he was not a candidate would work to his detriment. He had better convey his willingness to accept by a letter “to some *discreet* friend or friends.” As for Slidell himself, nothing was to be gained by a reconciliation with Pierce. He was in good company, as it was, “for the feeling of contempt for Pierce in the Senate is general. indeed, with the exception *perhaps* of General Dodge, not a man there is in favor of his renomination.” Pierce’s own expectation of a second term was, therefore, utterly absurd. “But I am writing treason & my letter is

<sup>25</sup> Newport, Rhode Island, September 2, 1855.

<sup>26</sup> Washington, October 11, 1855.

to go through the State Department. I must not further expose my head."<sup>27</sup>

Buchanan wrote the desired letter, taking the occasion of a political declaration of faith to offer to Slidell the tribute of a personal friendship. Thus, almost in commencing, he writes: "I have no reserve to yourself either on the subject of the Presidency or any other subject, and yet I cannot make up my mind to write, *even to you*, 'acknowledging the obligation under which every man should be of obedience to the popular will'." In closing, he testifies that "I have written to you more freely than to any other friend the real sentiments of my heart."<sup>28</sup> Nor is there any reason to doubt the sincerity of these protestations. At all events, the letter confirmed the faith of its recipient in the political orthodoxy of Buchanan.<sup>29</sup>

By 1856 the preconvention campaign was under way, all possible scruples of the candidate having been overcome.<sup>30</sup> The support of General Cass, announced in February, was particularly welcome. Slidell attributed it in part to the antipathy of Cass toward Douglas, who was believed to be an intending candidate and whose competition would be more formidable than that of Pierce.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Washington, December 9, 1855.

<sup>28</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, IX. 485-487. Buchanan to Slidell, London, December 28, 1855.

<sup>29</sup> Washington, January 17, 1856.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan*, X. 23. January 30, 1856.

<sup>31</sup> Washington, February 7, 1856.

Douglas, however, might himself come into the Buchanan camp. Even without Douglas, the Northwest, save Illinois, was safe. And on closer examination, Douglas himself was seen to possess some virtues. "I thought at first," wrote Slidell, "that he would give us a great deal of trouble. but his tone is now entirely changed & with his present feeling I would prefer that he should not formally retire." The real enemy was Pierce. Slidell would watch his every move. But Buchanan need not fear. His ground was impregnable. It might be debatable at this time whether Buchanan should return. Firm friends held different views regarding this. But Slidell would still counsel absence.<sup>32</sup>

In May, Slidell thought it advisable that Buchanan, who had meanwhile returned to America and was at his estate of Wheatland, should take a positive stand on the Kansas-Nebraska question. "This you can do in perfect harmony with your whole record—I believe that it will reconcile Douglas & if it do not it will at least spike his guns." It would be opportune, also, if Buchanan should seize upon the forthcoming visit of the Pennsylvania state delegation announcing his nomination at Harrisburg to deny categorically the possibility of his ever accepting a second term in the presidency. "It will appear much better in that form than by letter to individuals."<sup>33</sup> Both

<sup>32</sup> Washington, March 11, 1856.

<sup>33</sup> Washington, May, 1856.

of these points Slidell deemed sufficiently important to stress soon afterward in a second letter to the rather slow moving Buchanan. Particularly must he indicate the vote he would have cast on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill had he been in Congress at the time.<sup>34</sup>

A rumor that Douglas and Hunter were combining to support Pierce determined Slidell to go at once to Cincinnati to marshal his forces in person.<sup>35</sup> His activities upon arrival are described with appreciation by S. M. Barlow of New York, a co-worker in the cause, who recognised in Slidell the master spirit<sup>36</sup> in the Buchanan campaign, achieving what Barlow had previously deemed the impossible. On the very eve of the convention, and, as Barlow asserts, almost utterly without previous organization, Slidell and Benjamin, Bayard and Bright, all of them United States senators, foregathered in Barlow's temporary home at Cincinnati to plan the discomfiture of Douglas and the elevation of Buchanan. Success was promptly seen to depend upon the character of the delegation from New York. Two factions, the "Softs," who were friendly to Douglas, and the "Hards," who obeyed the leadership of Mr. Schell, a friend of Buchanan, each claimed to be

<sup>34</sup> Washington, May 24, 1856.

<sup>35</sup> Washington, May 26, 1856.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Stanwood, *A History of Presidential Elections* (4th Ed.), p. 198, says of 1856 that "The preliminary intriguing has probably never been greater in any national nominating convention than it was at that time."

the legitimate spokesmen for New York. In the organization of the convention, however, Senator Bayard, who received the chairmanship of the committee on credentials, undertook to overcome the preference of a majority of his associates for the "Softs" to the extent of a compromise, which split the New York delegation equally between Douglas and Buchanan. The committee itself presented two reports, that of the majority, still loyal to Douglas, that of the minority as indicated above. Decision rested with the main body of delegates, who, by a narrow margin, adopted the minority report, a result due almost wholly to the maneuvering of that little group of master politicians gathered under Barlow's roof, most influential among whom was Slidell. As Barlow himself admitted, "Mr. Slidell was naturally the leader of the friends of Mr. Buchanan. His calmness, shrewdness and earnest friendship for Mr. Buchanan were recognized by all, and whatever he advised was promptly assented to." Barlow goes on to praise the honesty with which Slidell refused to purchase support by means of pledges which might later embarrass the administration, and declares that he was present somewhat later in Washington at an interview in which Slidell impressed strongly upon Buchanan the latter's entire freedom from commitment. In the opinion of Barlow, the whole achievement was the more remarkable in view of the fact that, save

for Louisiana and Virginia, almost no part of the South was favorable to Buchanan, while in the North, the source of his actual strength, his forces were unorganized. Only at the last moment "Mr. Slidell undertook this task, and before the meeting of the convention Mr. Buchanan's success was assured."<sup>37</sup> Having won his major point, Slidell aimed at conciliation. Douglas was somewhat propitiated by permission to name John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as the vice-presidential candidate, to whom Slidell himself wrote that "I was induced to urge your nomination on the Louisiana delegation by the earnest appeal of Richardson of Illinois [a Douglas leader] whose bearing & conduct during the convention had been most manly & straightforward. I considered your selection for the Vice Presidency as a graceful & merited compliment to the friends of Douglas."<sup>38</sup>

Success had finally crowned the efforts of Slidell, marking indeed the apex of his career. Too often, as in Mexico and France, his great abilities were pitted against hopeless odds. Here, in a fair field, they attained a most difficult objective, pursued for the past eight years with intelligence and faith.

While Slidell was thus promoting the success of his friend and winning for himself something of the position of a king-maker, his own career

<sup>37</sup> G. T. Curtis, *Buchanan*, II. 170-173.

<sup>38</sup> From a letter kindly called to my attention by Dr. Roy F. Nichols of the University of Pennsylvania.



in the senate underwent more than one interesting development. It fell to his lot as chairman of the committee on naval affairs to defend the decisions of his brother-in-law, Commodore Matthew C. Perry, as a member of the Naval Retiring Board,<sup>39</sup> the function of which was to weed incompetents from the service, a thankless task rewarded by nothing more certain than the enmity of the same incompetents and their friends. On a bill to extend patents and other advantages to the McCormicks, it is interesting to find Slidell in the opposition, once more under direction from Baton Rouge, for "The Legislature of Louisiana has instructed me to vote against the extension of any and every patent in every possible shape."<sup>40</sup> One finds him also waging war against claims for damages imputed to the War of 1812 presented by Hamlin of Maine on behalf of his constituents.<sup>41</sup> In a minor way, perhaps, these votes and points of view reflected credit upon Slidell's sincerity and his watchfulness over the public interest.

It would be pleasant if one could dwell on these alone and omit an incident which brings discredit upon all concerned, upon Slidell by no means least. The part played by Slidell in the assault upon Sumner, though negative, is not creditable. So strong were Slidell's original prejudices against

<sup>39</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, pp. 311, 314, 315, 324, 325. March 31, 1856.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1st and 2nd Sessions, p. 1288. May 23, 1856.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 965. April 18, 1856.



Sumner that only a few weeks after the Mackenzie trial, in which Sumner had wielded so useful and friendly a pen, Slidell, though sojourning at the same hotel in Saratoga with Sumner, declined opportunities to meet him, on the plea that although he could not be other than grateful for Sumner's "chivalrous and zealous advocacy" of his brother, social relations could never be candid with one whose avowed purpose it was "to exclude in his region the class to which he [Slidell] belonged from the courtesies of social life and the common rites of humanity." Nevertheless, when both were in the senate, it seems that for a time Slidell and Sumner were on friendly terms.<sup>42</sup>

That such an awkward friendship could survive the tests of American public life in the fifties was hardly to be expected. And, when Sumner was struck down within hearing of Slidell and almost in the presence of himself and Douglas, neither made a move to interfere or to condole. Such cold blooded indifference created a scandal which Slidell could not ignore. His defence, which does him little credit, is a matter of record.

The Senate will recollect that we adjourned at an early hour on that day. I went into the ante-room, where I found my friend from Illinois [Mr. Douglas], Governor Fitzpatrick of Alabama, and Mr. J. Glancy Jones, of Pennsylvania, in conversation. They were seated. I approached them and asked them if they were engaged in any particular or private conversation. On receiving a

<sup>42</sup> George H. Haynes, *Charles Sumner* (Philadelphia, 1909), p. 74.

negative response, I sat down and joined them in conversation. We had been there some minutes—I think we were alone in the antechamber—when a person, (if I recollect aright, it was Mr. Jones, a messenger of the Senate,) rushed in, apparently in great trepidation, and said that somebody was beating Mr. Sumner. We heard this remark without any particular emotion; for my own part, I confess I felt none. I am not disposed to participate in broils of any kind. I remained very quietly in my seat; the other gentlemen did the same; we did not move. A minute or two afterward, another person passed through the Chamber and said that Mr. Sumner had been very badly beaten, and that the affray was over. Mr. Brooks's name was then mentioned for the first time. Hearing that the affray was over, and hearing that Mr. Brooks was concerned in the matter, I felt a little more interest, for I had really supposed that it was some ordinary scuffle. I did not know from what cause it originated, and was not disposed to meddle in it.

Slidell finally did muster enough interest to enter the senate chamber, where he learned more details of the tragedy, without, however, seeing the victim, and soon returned to the ante-room “with the intention of resuming the conversation (somewhat of an interesting character) which had been interrupted by this affray.” But he was not thus to avoid all encounter with Sumner, for in leaving to go home, by a door-way which he had no idea that Sumner would use also, he came upon him face to face, “leaning on two persons whom I did not recognize. His face was covered with blood.”

Slidell continued this process of self-condemnation before the bar of history in words which

would have done full justice to the priest and the Levite as they passed by the bleeding victim of robbery and pillage. "I am not particularly fond of scenes of any sort. I have no associations or relations of any kind with Mr. Sumner; I have not spoken to him for two years. I did not think it necessary to express my sympathy, or make any advances toward him. If I had continued, I should have crossed his path, and interrupted his progress to a sofa; he was evidently faint and weak. I very naturally turned in another direction; and instead of passing through the ante-room, entered the Senate Chamber in this direction, [through the side door.]" From all of which, Slidell drew the moral that those who induced Congress to make a formal investigation of the incident had no other object than "to deceive the public and make a false impression on popular opinion."<sup>43</sup>

One or two more aspects of Slidell's life in the senate should be dwelt upon before a return to the electoral canvass of 1856. One is the brief but highly significant item that Slidell in July, 1856, was seeking to abrogate the Treaty of 1842 which bound the United States to coöperate with Great Britain in a patrol of the African coast.<sup>44</sup> Another

<sup>43</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions, pp. 1304-1305. May 27, 1856.

<sup>44</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions, p. 1477. July 26, 1856.

was the dilemma created in the strict-construction mind of Slidell by the question of internal improvements. Here, even more than in the matter of voting contrary to the instructions of the Louisiana legislature, lay the basis for philosophical contradiction. Slidell was a strict constructionist. Public improvements under national auspices were a perpetual object of suspicion and disapproval. Nevertheless, it was Slidell's fate to represent a Mississippi River state eternally dependent on national aid against the ravages of the waters. As Slidell phrased the difficulty, "I have never doubted that a general system of internal improvements, or appropriations for making specific improvements within a State, by the General Government, not of a national character, were at variance with the spirit and principles of the Constitution. The great difficulty with me has been to define the line where the national character of improvements ceases and the local character begins." He frankly avowed that expediency here entered with him as a determining factor. Appropriations for work on the Mississippi counterbalanced at times his natural qualms of theory. Thus he voted for a bill in 1854 which he felt that the President was entirely justified in vetoing, the more so as "the bill had intentionally been made as offensive to him as possible." Of a more recent bill, framed on more correct principles, he believed, however, that Pierce's veto was unjustified,

and cited even Calhoun, the great apostle of strict construction, as satisfied with both the constitutionality and the expediency of an improvement on the Ohio River below the falls at Louisville. The mischief of it was that a vicious circle of reasoning was depriving New Orleans of a navy yard, because the channel was too shallow, and of deeper channels, because there was no navy yard—"a mode of argument reprobated by all logicians from the days of Aristotle. Jeremy Bentham would have classed it among the weakest of all fallacies." He then examined the presidential veto in detail, with its objection that the improvements desired were part of a general system, not in harmony with the principles of the Democracy. In reply, he reprehended "the slur which the President, unintentionally I trust, has thus cast upon the Democratic Senators who voted for this bill. For myself, I repudiate the insinuation as unfounded in fact. I have had no understanding, express or implied, to sustain any of the numerous appropriations for rivers and harbors now on the Calendar. I shall examine and judge of each on its own merits. There are many of them that can never receive my vote." The bill, it may be added, passed over the President's veto by 31 to 12, a victory for Slidell.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions, pp. 1542-1543. July 7, 1856.

In August, he gave to the senate a detailed explanation of the need of a survey, looking toward extensive improvements at the mouth of the Atchafalaya, an outlet for the Red River.<sup>46</sup> He even deviated so far from the theory of every state for itself as to recommend the national appropriation of \$15,000 for the purchase of a fresh stock of sugar-cane in Louisiana. His justification was that such action would lower the price of sugar to consumers in general.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, it was necessary to maintain a watchful supervision over the campaign of Buchanan. Fundamental policies and small questions of detail alike concerned Slidell. In communicating to Buchanan the result of his nomination, his lieutenant pointed out that the first opportunity should be utilized to pay a deserved compliment to the Old Line Whigs, many of whom, as Slidell had foreseen, were coming into the Democratic fold.<sup>48</sup>

In furthering Buchanan's prospects, Slidell left little to the chance that Buchanan himself might think of the right thing to say and do. He reminded him to thank Pierce for his endorsement. He warned him that Pierce, who at heart desired his defeat, could accomplish this only by prolonging the troubles in Kansas. He recited the sinister plan of Davis to withdraw United States troops,

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1958. August 6, 1856.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2113. August 15, 1856.

<sup>48</sup> Washington, June 14, 1856.

leaving the territory to anarchy, and concluded that if Pierce accepted this advice, it would be necessary to denounce him, even at the cost of some Southern votes, for the sake of holding the North in line. If the worst should come to the worst, he hoped that Douglas could be persuaded to take the initiative in such a move. Meanwhile, has Buchanan remembered to write to Cass and Douglas? Cass has been to Pierce to remonstrate against the proposed removal of troops. Douglas has refrained from doing so on the ground of a breach with the President, with whom he had no influence.<sup>49</sup>

A few days later, Slidell was warning Buchanan to keep close watch of the Lancaster papers, any indiscretion on the part of whose editors would be attributed to him. Already Phelps of Missouri was complaining of one such editorial, very friendly to Benton. And Benton, Slidell reminds the candidate, has not the confidence of any of Buchanan's friends. For himself, he says, "I confess that I have strong prejudices against Benton which may bias my judgment & I hope but do not expect that my apprehensions of his treachery may not be realised." Another uncertain quantity is Soule. Nothing will be gained by his support, yet his open hostility should not be courted.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Washington, June 17, 1856.

<sup>50</sup> Washington, July 4, 1856.



Ranging the entire political horizon, Slidell could not ignore the German element in the Northwest, and he counseled Buchanan to conciliate their spokesman, Grund.<sup>51</sup> A far greater force than Grund, however, was Robert J. Walker, and, despite a natural predilection for Buchanan, he too must be won over, since he was governed by his antagonisms rather than by his friendships. "Walker is ardently your friend, but he is more ardently the enemy of Benton." That unlucky article in the Lancaster *Intelligencer* favoring Benton had cost Buchanan the establishment by Walker, whose resources for such a venture were more than ample, of a newspaper in New York devoted to the Buchanan interest. But even now it might not be too late. He would soon be in New York. "Now pray write him at once & invite him to visit Wheatland & when he shall have talked with you an hour everything will be right. He is proud & sensitive & should be conciliated." Slidell himself was taking care of Grund, whose objections were to Buchanan's friends, not to the candidate himself. He was gifted and a power among the Germans. But the real issue was Walker. On no account must Buchanan fail to write to him.<sup>52</sup>

Two days later, Grund was Slidell's chief theme. Buchanan had only to give the word and

<sup>51</sup> Washington, July 17, 1856.

<sup>52</sup> Washington, July 18, 1856.

he would enter the lists with enthusiasm as a correspondent for the *Philadelphia Ledger* and other papers. In reaching such a decision, Buchanan must remember that the matter was near to the heart of both Senators Bright and Douglas.

In the midsummer of 1856, Slidell was far from well, but his reports lose nothing in vigor from their writer's infirmities. Kentucky will be the cynosure of the doubtful states to the South. Maryland was already safe, Cass and Toombs never having seen greater enthusiasm than at Frederick. Congress would soon adjourn. The Black Republicans would not dare defeat the appropriation bills. "If they do, the Senate will not yield an inch. For myself I should not regret to see them taking that course. We should have a foretaste of the consequences of disunion. I believe that it would produce a general panic & bankruptcy in the Northern States. we at the South have so little for the money expended among us that we should comparatively suffer but little embarrassment."<sup>53</sup> But even Black Republicans were evidently forgotten when "Everything looks bright & even the croakers are silent."<sup>54</sup>

At the end of September, with the national election but a few weeks away, Slidell emphasizes the importance of carrying the state election in Pennsylvania for its sentimental effect elsewhere. "In

<sup>53</sup> Senate Chamber, August 9, 1856.

<sup>54</sup> Washington, August 12, 1856.

this view we have said that every dollar contributed for Pennsylv<sup>a</sup> would economise ten in New York." He encloses a letter from Stuart of Michigan putting the case with even less reserve. "In my opinion it [Pennsylvania] is the great battle of the campaign. And if any amount of labor and money will secure it, they should be expended."<sup>55</sup> On Pennsylvania hung the decision of Kentucky and Tennessee, whereas success in Pennsylvania would insure large majorities in the fifteen southern states and in all the doubtful free states. With so much at stake, Slidell was none too sure of Pennsylvania prospects; "for the first time since your nomination, I have felt alarmed."<sup>56</sup>

In the excitement of the campaign, Slidell permitted himself an expression which should be accepted only with qualifications. In a letter to the corresponding secretary of the Democratic central committee at New Orleans, he did not "hesitate to declare that if Frémont be elected, the

<sup>55</sup> Stuart to Slidell, Kalamazoo, September 18, 1856, forwarded in Slidell to Buchanan, New York, September 29, 1856. See also *Daily True Delta*, October 10, 1861. "SHAMELESS CONFESSION OF POLITICAL INTRIGUE. The following is taken from the *N. Y. Herald* . . . Weed acknowledges the soft impeachment (corruption) in the ff. Painful as the confession is, we are bound, in truth and from knowledge, to say that James Buchanan was elected President, and this great and then happy and glorious republic ruined, simply because Messrs. Wendell, Forney and Belmont raised \$50,000 more money to be expended in Pennsylvania, than William A. Hall, Truman Smith and the writer of this article could procure for the same object."

<sup>56</sup> Slidell to Buchanan, October 4, 1856. Enclosing letter from Ward to Slidell, Louisville, September 30, 1856.

Union cannot and ought not to be preserved." Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that Slidell, according to his light, was still a Union man, and that his very advocacy of Buchanan was an effort to hold together the Union, since he believed that he had found the man for the task. So that his utterance, though indiscreet and regrettable, was scarcely "the insane ebullition of heated partisanship" which the *Daily Picayune* condemned.<sup>57</sup>

This was on the eighth day of October. By the seventeenth he had seen the shadows flee away. With Pennsylvania and Indiana secure, "The Union is now safe, but we must endeavor to make your majority overwhelming." To that end, everything possible must be done to heal the party dissensions in New York. Slidell will go there in person. Has Buchanan any instructions?<sup>58</sup> Once arrived, he found that prospects exceeded anticipations. In only one congressional district was friction still serious, and with the tide so favorable, victory was beyond doubt, "but I shall

<sup>57</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, October 8, 1856. The comment of George Bancroft upon this is also very severe. "But Slidell, as if Buchanan had not already enough to carry, adds his voice for a contingent breaking up of the Union, & Choate openly counsels the same, if his words have any meaning. Oh! for a voice of true democracy! But were a man to utter the truth, this bastard race that controls the organization, this unproductive hybrid begot by Southern arrogance upon Northern subserviency, would, I dare say, go raving." Marcy Papers. Library of Congress, Folio 72. Bancroft to Marcy, September 24, 1856. Also printed in *Life of Bancroft*.

<sup>58</sup> Washington, October 17, 1856.

be only half satisfied if your triumph be not overwhelming." In a postscript, courteously, as an afterthought, is the added cheer that "the financial question has been attended to."<sup>59</sup>

It only remained to congratulate the victor, which Slidell did in a note both of encouragement and warning. "You are not to lie in a bed of roses for the next four years, but I feel the most entire confidence that you will be able to be [sic] build up & consolidate a sound homogeneous national democracy that can defy the attacks of fanatics north & south. I have almost as little sympathy with the Rhett school of politicians as with the Know nothing ruffians of Baltimore & New Orleans."<sup>60</sup> The election of his friend—it is scarcely too daring to say protégé—Buchanan so distinctly marks an era in the life of Slidell that one can scarcely regard it as other than the climax of his career. It was in a sense the third act of a tragedy. A slowly gathering momentum lifted Slidell to the senate, his friend to the Presidency, in each case the goal of a career. From then on the action, though not at once apparent, led to a catastrophe.

<sup>59</sup> New York, October 31, 1856.

<sup>60</sup> Washington, November 13, 1856.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

SUCCESS having been achieved at the polls, it remained to organize the administration and to formulate its policies. To neither of these problems was Slidell indifferent, though his advice and conduct in both were the essence of discretion. In foreign policy, he expressed himself to Buchanan as opposed to "any extension of the novel and false principle introduced into our foreign policy by the Clayton & Bulwer treaty & I could only be induced with extreme reluctance to give my vote for its ratification by the desire to relieve your administration from embarrassment."<sup>1</sup> In domestic concerns, he asserted that any rumors to the effect that he was busying himself as to cabinet appointments were utterly without foundation.<sup>2</sup> But he entreated Buchanan to come to Washington no later than early February. "You will of course be immensely annoyed, but I feel that you cannot correctly feel the public pulse anywhere else."<sup>3</sup> A letter of this period from Robert M. McLane to

<sup>1</sup> Washington, December 27, 1856.

<sup>2</sup> Senate Chamber, January 5, 1857.

<sup>3</sup> A second letter of January 5, 1857.

Howell Cobb reveals very clearly the position which Slidell was deemed by other politicians to hold in the make-up of the cabinet—a position to which his services to the President Elect unquestionably entitled him.

I went over fully with Slidell last night the views I expressed to you in the morning, and urged him to write Mr. B. explaining in detail all the motives and impulses that prompted certain Southern States Rights senators in their counsels, challenging Mr. B's attention to the fact that the senators from Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas had not and would not assume the responsibility of recommending Mr. Walker for the State Department and that the senators from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas had not and would not be *united* in such a recommendation, there being in truth but *one* from each of these states that *had* or *would* take the responsibility. *Slidell said he would write and write fully.* . . .<sup>4</sup>

Assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, Slidell really could not ignore cabinet appointments. He congratulated Buchanan that Bright of Indiana, by returning to the senate, relieved him of the embarrassment of breaking with Douglas on that issue. But, on the other hand, he warned that there must be no appointment of a Douglas partisan, for Douglas was altogether too high and mighty, setting up to control not merely Illinois but the whole Northwest. The old ani-

<sup>4</sup>U. B. Phillips, *The Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb*, R. M. McLane to H. Cobb, Baltimore, February 14, 1857.



mosity, laid aside for the campaign only, was developing into a bitter feud. As Slidell interpreted it, Douglas behaved "like a Malay maddened," who, in his frenzy against Bright, included Slidell for defending him in his absence. "I have had to be very cool to prevent an open rupture with him & was obliged at last to tell him that when I ceased to be his friend & became his enemy it would not be necessary for him to have recourse to third parties, but would discover it by my altered bearing." Nevertheless, the Northwest could not be ignored in Buchanan's cabinet, and in view of Douglas and his rivals, General Cass was its only available statesman. Any objections to Cass could be overcome by the appointment of a capable assistant. He was the undoubted man for the state department. His appointment to that post, moreover, would relieve Buchanan of an embarrassing alternative between Cobb and Walker. Walker had great talents, but his friends controlled him. They were dangerous men. Of the two, Cobb was the safer, but Buchanan knew them as well as Slidell. One place should go to an Old Line Whig. Here Benjamin of Louisiana would be Slidell's nominee. One more appointment, and Slidell is done. The navy, if it was to escape utter ruin, required, during the next four years, a "firm, prompt, severe man." In conclusion, Slidell apologized for intruding on the cabinet question,

but pleaded for his suggestions the rare merit of unselfishness.<sup>5</sup>

Buchanan having decided to visit Washington, the question arose where to lodge the President-Elect. The National Hotel was unsafe because of an epidemic; Brown's, in the neighborhood, might have been contaminated; and Willard's savored too much of abolitionism.<sup>6</sup> Buchanan decided for himself on the National, and Slidell could only warn him not to eat or sleep there.<sup>7</sup> More thrilling, even if not more important, was the still vexed question of the cabinet. Cass had consented to head the department of state, agreeing very handsomely to leave the naming of his assistant to Buchanan. The candidate under discussion for the attorney generalship was, by very reliable accounts, unfit.<sup>8</sup> Some appointment, Slidell positively insisted, must go to Toucey.<sup>9</sup> "Allow me to say that the regret & disappointment at the omission of Mr. Toucey's name would be greater than you can well imagine & that it will be most sensibly felt by your faithful friend &c, John Slidell."<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding his many claims to Buchanan's favor, Slidell was modest in his requests.

<sup>5</sup> Washington, February 14, 1857.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, February 18, 1857.

<sup>7</sup> Washington, February 23, 1857.

<sup>8</sup> Senate Chamber, February 19, 1857.

<sup>9</sup> Telegram of February 25, 1857.

<sup>10</sup> Senate Chamber, February 25, 1857.

The patronage of Louisiana was his for the asking,<sup>11</sup> but outside the state he made few recommendations. Governor Pratt of Maryland, an Old Line Whig, seemed to him the logical appointee as naval officer at Baltimore.<sup>12</sup> In fact, recognition of Maryland Whigs constituted a conscious policy with Slidell as the best hope of winning their state to the true faith.<sup>13</sup> Those who already walked in the light were mainly gathered at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, and the President was urged to mingle with these southern admirers. On his failure to do so, however, Slidell put in writing what Buchanan would have gathered for himself, had he come; namely, the unanimity of southern disapproval of Walker's course in Kansas during the summer of 1857 and of southern confidence that Buchanan would at the first opportunity signify his own dissatisfaction with his emissary.<sup>14</sup>

The nomination and election of Buchanan naturally increased Slidell's personal prestige, and he was viewed as an important if not in fact the leading spokesman in the senate for the incoming administration. In February, 1857, he declined to concur in passing a eulogium upon the retiring

<sup>11</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, September 26, 1857. From Washington, September 25. "It is understood that Mr. Gayarré, the historian of Louisiana, has been selected for minister to Spain, but the appointment has been deferred in deference to Senator Slidell."

<sup>12</sup> March 11, 1857.

<sup>13</sup> White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, July 26, 1857.

<sup>14</sup> White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, August 12, 1857.

postmaster general.<sup>15</sup> On February 28, he wiped out old scores with Marcy, and perhaps Pierce, by an elaborate condemnation of the state department for the impropriety and even discourtesy of its action in referring the establishment of a new mission to Persia not to the committee on foreign relations but to that on finance. He advocated a hands-off policy, being opposed to a mission the commercial significance of which would be slight, yet the very existence of which would make for intrigue and for the unnecessary commitment of the United States in questions of primary interest to Great Britain, France, and Russia. His argument failed to convince by a vote of 25 to 21.<sup>16</sup>

One last fond look at Cuba evidently lay behind a proposal advanced by Slidell in the first Congress of the new administration to vest in the President authority, subject to certain restrictions, to suspend the neutrality laws. Such a course would legalize filibustering and open the way to fresh projects against Cuba. On the other hand, Slidell made it clear that he was no friend to one filibusterer, William Walker, who was at that time much in the public eye. Although he condemned Walker's recent seizure by Commodore Paulding as a breach of international law, he denied to the victim possession of a single requisite

<sup>15</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 3rd Session, Appendix, p. 304. February 27, 1857.

<sup>16</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 3rd Session, p. 1020. February 28, 1857.

for the part he had chosen to play; "he is neither a good soldier nor a prudent administrator. His former expedition abundantly demonstrates his glaring incapacity alike in the field and the cabinet."<sup>17</sup>

One of the early acts, it will be recalled, of Slidell's career in the senate, was in connection with the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and his proposal to eliminate the Missouri Compromise line. The decision reached in 1854 had risen by 1858 to confound both friend and foe. And Slidell, the moderate, in a speech on behalf of recognition by Congress of the Lecompton constitution, now stood revealed as skeptical of the ability of his moderate friend Buchanan and other well-wishers of the Union much longer to maintain its integrity. He gave warning that the seeming apathy of the South must not be mistaken for indifference.

If we reject this bill, the agitation gotten up by plotting and unscrupulous politicians, operating upon the passions and prejudices of the people of the free States, will be prolonged and aggravated until a peaceful solution of this vital question of slavery will become impossible. We have every reason, so far as material interests are concerned, to be a united and harmonious people; but we cannot shut our eyes to the melancholy fact that at this day there prevails between the masses of the people of the eastern and southern States as deep a feeling of alienation—I might say of animosity—as ever existed between England and France. The fate of this measure will probably decide whether this feeling shall be kept alive and embittered

<sup>17</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, pp. 461-462. January 28, 1858.

until longer continuance of a connection so distasteful and repulsive to both parties, shall be intolerable, or whether we shall strive by a generous emulation in the interchange of good offices, by an abandonment of all irritating subjects of discussion, to become once more what we were in the infancy of the Republic—States sisters in feeling as in name. What I have said as to the consequences of the rejection of this bill is in no spirit of bravado or menace; it is uttered more in sorrow than in anger and with a full sense of the responsibility which attaches to it. I anticipate the old clamor of treason and revolution against all who venture to speak the truth on this question; but if it were not told now, it might be too late to avert the danger that threatens the existence of a Union which in better days I was wont to believe would be perpetual.<sup>18</sup>

Slidell found the keynote for a more constructive speech than that just quoted in the legal aspects of Walker's seizure by Paulding. Drawing from numerous authorities on the Law of Nations,—De Rayneval, Wheaton, Vattel, Grotius, Bynker-

<sup>18</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, pp. 116, 117. March 15, 1858. See also for comment on this speech the *Louisiana Courier*, March 26, 1858. "It is a short and particularly sensible talk on the subject, and every word is directly to the point. Without pretending to be a set speech, without the smallest claim to eloquence or brilliancy, it is one of the very best and most reliable expositions of the intentions of the administration which could be desired. Mr. Slidell has no nonsense about him. He does not foam at the mouth about the rights of the South. Unlike most men of Northern birth and education, he does not pretend to any special enthusiasm for the institutions of his adopted State, and he calls on his future, without appealing to his past actions, to justify his course and his position . . . we balk a little at his partial disclaimer of being a strong States Rights man, and a little more at the reasons he assigns for his advocacy of Mr. Pugh's amendment, declaring the rights of Kansas to alter her constitution whenever she chooses, no matter what may be the provisions of that constitution in regard to its own amendment; but we are willing to admit his claim to be judged by his future acts, when the time for action shall fortunately, or as he thinks, 'unfortunately,' arrive."



schoeck, and Martens, among others—he concluded that Walker’s seizure was technically legal, but mistaken in policy through its effect of converting the captive into a pseudo-martyr. But America, Slidell contended, was quite unnecessarily restricted in the freedom with which her citizens were permitted to enlist in foreign wars. Our President, whose control over diplomacy gave Congress no alternative than to sustain him or disgrace the country, might as well have equal right with the British sovereign to suspend neutrality laws. Bestowal of such a grant would, under existing circumstances, scarcely involve us with Cuba, where all attempts “except by negotiation, should, in my opinion, now be abandoned.” In Mexico it was otherwise. “Should Spain intervene there, Americans would have a part in the contest. I wish this to be done legally.”<sup>19</sup>

The first congress of Buchanan found Slidell a watch dog of the treasury. He objected to \$10,000 and expenses as too high a compensation to Townsend Harris for the commercial treaty with Siam,<sup>20</sup> and similarly opposed a grant of more than one year’s pay to the widow of a certain Captain Herndon, whose husband had died under circumstances of singular heroism.<sup>21</sup> The same

<sup>19</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, April 8, 1858, pp. 1538-1541.

<sup>20</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, p. 1625. April 16, 1858.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1960-1961. May 5, 1858.



session found him also as something of a bull dog in his attitude toward Stephen A. Douglas, with whom he came into conflict in open senate. Douglas had been speaking on Kansas. He was interrupted by laughter. He turned in anger, saying:

I confess I do not like this mode of trying to laugh down propositions. If gentlemen can answer them it is one thing; but to laugh them down, is another.

Mr. Slidell: I confess I do not at all like the tone of the Senator from Illinois.

Mr. Douglas: Very well.

Mr. Slidell: It is extremely arrogant and offensive.

Mr. Douglas: I desire to say in reply, that this laughing had proceeded in a manner that was exceedingly annoying. I never interrupt a gentleman on the floor. I will answer him after he concludes, if I think proper.

Slidell then pleaded that he was not alone, but declared, "If the Senator from Illinois wishes to single me out for any criticisms of that sort, he will find me ready to respond on all occasions, at all times, and in every way." The incident closed with the comment by Douglas that Slidell was not the only responsible senator. "There is nothing remarkable in that; and in that assurance he does not stand isolated as the only member in the body that holds himself so."<sup>22</sup>

The subject of internal improvements, of perennial interest to all congressmen, those from

<sup>22</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, p. 2536. May 31, 1858.

Louisiana by no means least, elicited from Slidell in the spring of 1858 a pronouncement highly creditable to his consistency and his integrity. On previous occasions he had championed improvements, more especially those on the Mississippi, yet had retained enough of his fundamental theory to defend Pierce on one occasion for a veto of improvements on constitutional grounds. Slidell now expressed himself as the convinced enemy of national improvements, however justifiable they seemed in individual cases, owing to the fact that bills of this character seldom secured the requisite support unless concessions were made for improvements wholly useless for any other purpose than "pork," an expression which Slidell very clearly defined but did not employ, possibly because it had not then gained currency. "From these considerations, I am inclined to think that, on the ground of expediency alone, apart from all constitutional scruples, no bill of a similar character will hereafter receive my support. I shall adhere to this opinion unless I see very good reasons to change it. Perhaps an overflowing Treasury might induce me, in some degree, to modify it; but, with the views I now entertain, I do not consider it probable."<sup>23</sup>

As leader of the Buchanan forces in the senate, Slidell was in charge, following the breach

<sup>23</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, p. 2673. June 5, 1858.

between Douglas and the President, of the campaign to read Douglas out of the party. One tilt in the engagement has already been noted. But it was deemed advisable to carry the war into the enemy's country, and to this end, in the summer of 1858, Slidell made an extended trip through the Northwest, with a view, there is little doubt, of undermining Douglas among his own constituents.

Immediately following Slidell's visit to Chicago, a local newspaper carried the story of horrible treatment meted out to the slaves on the Mississippi plantation administered by Douglas in the interest of his children, the tale being that they were farmed out to a factor at fifteen dollars a head and sublet by him to others, who abused them so shamefully that neighboring slave owners viewed them as a disgrace to the system. It is remarked by one biographer of Douglas that "explicit denial of the story came from Slidell some weeks after the election, when the slander had accomplished the desired purpose."<sup>24</sup> A more circumstantial version of the story relates that it was openly understood among the followers of the President that Mr. Slidell was the main instrument through which the federal patronage in Illinois was redistributed and that Dr. Daniel Brainard, in particular, as surgeon of the marine hospital, owed his appointment to the friendship of Francis Grund and Senator Slidell, "*Par nobile*

<sup>24</sup> Allen Johnson, *Stephen A. Douglas* (Macmillan, 1908), p. 391.

*fratrum.*" This is the more interesting as Brainard's name was associated with the origin of the Douglas canard. It was not until the New Orleans *Picayune* characterized it as such,<sup>25</sup> that the *Chicago Press and Tribune*, in which it first appeared, justified itself on the ground that:

We have only to say that the story came to us from a personal friend of Mr. Slidell—a gentleman of character and influence in this city—and he assured us that he had the statement from Slidell himself, during his visit to Chicago, while the late canvass was going on. His name is at the service of anyone authorized to demand it.

Demand arose that this man of character be named. Finally, on December 18, Slidell published in the *Washington Union* a formal denial of having told the story to Brainard or anyone else, intimating that Brainard either did not make the statement concerning Douglas to the Chicago newspaper, or else that he was guilty of a malicious falsehood. Accordingly, on December 23, Brainard addressed the editors of the *Press and Tribune* denying that he had ever made to them any such statement as that of which he was accused. On the day following the editors of the paper gave Brainard, and by implication Slidell, the lie direct.

<sup>25</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, December 12, 1858. "Those who know Mr. McHatton know that he is incapable of cruelty to his slaves; and none will ever believe that Mr. Slidell would stoop so low as to utter a deliberate falsehood to an Abolition editor, to injure Mr. Douglas. The whole thing was an electioneering dodge, and scarcely deserve the attention of the respectable parties whose names have become involved in it."

In July last, about the time of Mr. Slidell's visit to Chicago, one of the editors of this paper was informed by Dr. Daniel Brainard, Professor of Surgery in the Rush Medical College, in a conversation invited by the doctor himself, in his own office, that Mr. Douglas' slaves in the South were "the subjects of inhuman and disgraceful treatment—that they were hired out to a factor at fifteen dollars per annum each—that he, in turn, hired them out to others in lots, and that they were ill-fed, over-worked, and in every way so badly treated that they were spoken of in the neighbourhood where they are held as a disgrace to all slaveholders and the system they support." The authority given for these facts, by Dr. Brainard, was the Hon. John Slidell, of Louisiana.

On the twenty-eighth Brainard, in another letter, admitted that he had actually had such a conversation with the editors but denied that he had given Slidell as his authority. He did not, however, name any other authority, and the evidence inclines strongly, in this question of veracity between the doctor and the editor, in favor of the latter.<sup>26</sup>

In August, 1858, upon his arrival at Saratoga after this trip through the Northwest, Slidell addressed to the President a memorandum on conditions in the Douglas camp, the more interesting because of his alleged connection with this mendacious attempt to discredit Douglas in his own constituency. Slidell made no specific allusion to the charge, but did recommend the removal at once of Douglas partisans from federal office.

<sup>26</sup> James W. Sheahan, *The Life of Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1860), pp. 439-422.

By requesting the appointment as surgeon of the marine hospital of Dr. Daniel Brainard he strengthens a conviction, which denial will not silence, that it really was he who gave Brainard the story so promptly communicated by him to the press, which ultimately, after it gained circulation in the South, embarrassed Slidell himself.<sup>27</sup>

Slidell, according to all the canons of precedent, was entitled to a great place in the Buchanan administration, and he was repeatedly offered the mission to Paris.<sup>27a</sup> He refused it on the ground of political necessity in Louisiana and of his disinclination, with world affairs running smoothly, to accept "a mere mission of parade." But, unless Belmont would accept, he did feel impelled to recommend for the mission at Madrid his colleague, Benjamin, whose appointment "will not only be satisfactory but gratifying to me in every way."<sup>28</sup>

In January, 1859, Slidell introduced a bill, known as the \$30,000,000 bill, for an appropriation looking toward the acquisition of Cuba by negotiation.<sup>29</sup> This being referred to the committee on foreign relations, of which Slidell was himself a member, a report favorable to the bill

<sup>27</sup> Saratoga, New York, August 8, 1858.

<sup>27a</sup> The cordiality of Slidell's relations with the French legation at Washington was undoubtedly a recommendation for the post. In the words of the Comtesse de St. Roman, "The French Legation as a whole was in the most intimate contact with my parents."

<sup>28</sup> Atlantic City, August 22, 1858.

<sup>29</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 277. January 10, 1859.

presently appeared from the pen of its sponsor, upon presentation of which it was moved that "two thousand extra copies" be printed "of the very lucid and able report just read by the Senator from Louisiana."<sup>30</sup> In support of the bill, Slidell made the point that it was framed without consultation with the President, and that, contrary to the opinion of the senator from New York, it could not possibly advance the personal fortunes of Buchanan. What he probably meant was the political interests of the President and his party. Slidell was willing to grant as much, "and that, I think, is one of the best effects that will flow from the discussion of this subject."<sup>31</sup>

In February Slidell presented a petition, strange to say, from citizens of New York, who might have been expected to proceed through their own senators, denouncing the monopoly of public lands and asking that they be granted thereafter to actual settlers only.<sup>32</sup> At the same time he complained of the lack of discipline and the indifference of Democratic senators in their attitude toward the Cuban bill.<sup>33</sup> On the seventh he again pleaded this favorite cause,<sup>34</sup> and on the ninth he assured the senate that although the President had not

<sup>30</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 538. January 24, 1859.

<sup>31</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 687. January 31, 1859.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 772. February 3, 1859.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 787. February 3, 1859.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 858. February 7, 1859.



interfered in the strategy of the bill, "It would, however, be an unworthy affectation on my part to say that I was not perfectly persuaded that the President does desire, sincerely desire, that this bill should pass. I infer that, not from anything that he has said to me more than to others, but from the tenor of his message, and because this bill is in exact conformity with the spirit of his recommendation."<sup>35</sup> On the twenty-fifth he hinted that the President might readily be in possession of information, which it would be contrary to public policy for him to publish, which would convince him that negotiations for the acquisition of Cuba were feasible at that time.<sup>36</sup>

Another financial measure in which Slidell interested himself at this time was one in which, he was frank to say, his own affairs were involved. The custom house at New Orleans under construction on land donated by the city, valued at \$600,000, was, in its perpetually unfinished condition, an obstruction to the business of New Orleans. As Slidell put it, "I am not exaggerating, when I say that my own personal interests, in the period of the last ten years, have been affected to the extent of more than fifteen or twenty thousand dollars by the diminution of rents in the immediate vicinity of that property." To ascertain the total

<sup>35</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 906. February 9, 1859.

<sup>36</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 1347. February 25, 1859.

loss to the community, he would multiply his own by fifty. Here was a warrant for the completion of the project and the restoration of prosperity to the New Orleans business center. Let the government act with promptness.<sup>37</sup>

The conclusion of the Thirty-fifth Congress left Slidell free for a last death grapple with Soulé for control in Louisiana. Some excerpts from *The Daily True Delta*, an organ of Soulé, very graphically illustrate the malignity of the contest. Charges of Wall Street influence were as popular then as now, and Slidell was not immune. Thus an editorial of April 2, 1859, on "Our American Policy," argues that it is financial magnates, not the citizenry, who determine our Mexican relations. One might almost imagine himself reading a current issue of the *Nation* when he learns that "We are not to decide in favor of liberal principles and republican government in Mexico, because Slidell, Benjamin and others have a stupendous scheme to mature in Tehuantepec; nor make our influence paramount in Nicaragua, because the actual Secretary of State and associates on Wall Street, New York, must make a rich job of the transit route."<sup>38</sup> Three days later, under the caption "The Mass Meeting To-Night," the editor allows himself a range of invective almost

<sup>37</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 1572. March 2, 1859.

<sup>38</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, April 2, 1859.

Ciceronian in scope. Slidell is depicted as a veritable Catiline when "fresh from the federal city, backed by the whole power of the most corrupt Administration which ever held power, he opens at the capital of the State a species of tavern, and there, surrounded by the lowest, the meanest and the most degraded, arrogates to himself the right of saying who shall fill every public office in the State for four years to come."<sup>39</sup> Let any man who doubted the sinister influence of the boss visit the grogeries of St. Charles Street. "There the vulpine eye of Houmas Slidell is ever restlessly intent upon the individuals who throng those thoroughfares; there is his sojourning place until his schemes are matured and his plans are successful."<sup>40</sup> The question at issue, said the *Delta*, was "whether Slidell and Gallatin street, or the whole people of Louisiana, shall rule this commonwealth."<sup>41</sup> Warming to his theme, the editor continued:

"If there be any of you disposed to relinquish the rights the laws have secured to you, to give up to persons like Slidell, who scruple at nothing that is necessary to promote their interests, to aid in the reëstablishment of Gallatin street ruffianism under Slidellian auspices, to be followed by a Thug reaction, from which you alone will be the sufferers; we have nothing to say except that you deserve the degradation, the contempt, and the outrages of which you were made the victims."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, April 5, 1859.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

There is much more of the same sort, including various allusions to Slidell's alleged propensity for gambling<sup>43</sup> and numerous bitter taunts at Slidell's connection with the Houmas land swindle<sup>44</sup> and his defence by Benjamin, but the case for Soulé and the opposition is perhaps most neatly phrased in the issue of April 5, 1859, already quoted from. Under the caption "Democratic State Central Committee," the editor affirms that "This is not, as the organ of Houmas Slidell would lead the public to suppose, a contest between factions of a common party; it is, on the contrary, a contest between men who repudiate and denounce ruffianism in every shape, who hold in detestation Plaque-mine frauds, cab votes, Gallatin street assassinations and Thuggery, and those who have, through years of exertion, sought to establish such proceedings and things as part of the political system under which we live, and against which it is the duty of all honest men and good citizens to contend."<sup>45</sup>

A letter from Slidell to Buchanan on May 2, 1859, shows that attacks so violent as those hinted at above could not pass wholly unheeded. His optimism, however, was unruffled. "You will doubtless have heard or read of the attempt made in this State by Soulé & others to organize a new party composed of disaffected democrats & Know

<sup>43</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, April 12, 1859.

<sup>44</sup> To be discussed later.

<sup>45</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, April 5, 1859.

Nothings—The opposition to your administration among a certain portion of professing democrats has existed ever since your inauguration but has not been openly avowed by the leaders until the meeting at which Soulé made so furious an onslaught on you & your friends. I think it better thus, Soulé being a less dangerous foe than friend.” He looked for a decided majority in the state convention and the elimination of Soulé from the party councils.<sup>46</sup>

On the thirtieth Slidell was able to announce a victory more complete even than he had promised, and he now felt at liberty to accept the mission to Paris, in the event that Buchanan desired his services, with a view toward reconciling Napoleon III to American designs upon Cuba.<sup>47</sup> Coming two years after the original offer and refusal of the mission, this intimation from Slidell caused the President embarrassment, but he replied on June 8th that if Slidell had made up his mind “finally & without peradventure to accept the mission,” its present incumbent would be sounded with a view to retirement. To which Slidell replied, very courteously, that as, after all, it appeared that Napoleon was not open to suggestion concerning Cuba, he had no motive for leaving the senate. “Pray then consider my former letter as not written, indeed were there no other reason for this

<sup>46</sup> New Orleans, May 2, 1859.

<sup>47</sup> New Orleans, May 30, 1859

request, the idea that you could be in the slightest degree embarrassed by a change in the mission would be to me a sufficient reason for declining it, however brilliant might be the prospects of success."<sup>48</sup> Evidently relieved by this gracious acceptance of the situation, Buchanan closed the incident with a letter of compliment. "I honestly believe there is no gentleman in the United States so peculiarly qualified for that position as yourself. It is for yourself to say whether you will accept it or not & I hope you may decide in such a manner as will best promote your own happiness & prosperity & that of your family."<sup>49</sup>

Turning to another subject very near his own heart, Buchanan deprecated, what seemed to come from a reliable source, that Belmont had become a decided Douglas man. Slidell confirmed the report, his explanation for Belmont's defection being his failure to secure the mission at Madrid, a failure which Belmont imputed in no small degree to Slidell's failure to exert himself on his behalf. Belmont entrusted to Slidell for delivery to the President a letter of indignant protest, which Slidell refused to deliver and recommended its author to suppress. "This occurred I think in December last & I have since had no communication with Belmont, but have heard from others that he complains of me. I regret the

<sup>48</sup> New Orleans, June, 1859.

<sup>49</sup> Buchanan to Slidell, June 24, 1859.

alienation but shall take no pains to conciliate him."<sup>50</sup> Certainly a quarrel between Slidell and Belmont, the one the political the other the financial prop of the Buchanan organization, was no favorable augury for the administration.

The Thirty-sixth Congress, meeting for its first session in December, 1859, found Slidell in rôles of which some are familiar, others new. As might be expected, he was still working for an appropriation looking toward the acquisition of Cuba.<sup>51</sup> More novel was his objection to the issuance of bank notes by corporations within the District of Columbia.<sup>52</sup> But, in his antipathy to a permanent franchise granting the streets of Washington to the Georgetown and Catoclin railroad company, he occupied ground with modern progressives, distinctly in advance of his own day. He was willing to grant a thirty year franchise. At its expiration, "It seems to me that the property should revert to the cities of Washington and Georgetown. The inconvenience to the public may otherwise be very great." To the proposed charter he therefore offered an amendment that "at the expiration of said term [thirty years], the road, with all its fixtures, running stock, and material of every kind, shall become the property of the cities of Washington and Georgetown, in proportion of the

<sup>50</sup> Slidell to Buchanan, July, 1859.

<sup>51</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, p. 199. December 21, 1859.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375. January 9, 1860, and p. 1396. March 28, 1860.



respective populations of said cities, as they may be shown to exist by the general decennial census of 1890.”

To this enlightened plan opposition was raised by Brown of Mississippi and Cameron of Pennsylvania. Slidell countered by reminding Cameron of a canal from New Orleans to Lake Pontchartrain on which Cameron had been one of the chief contractors, in the franchise of which provision was inserted for eventual state ownership. If state ownership was possible in Louisiana, why was national ownership impossible in the District of Columbia? Regard should be had for the interest of posterity. “What will be the situation of Pennsylvania avenue thirty years hence, when this franchise expires, if these men are allowed to tear up the road, and destroy it?” But, upon the suggestion of a friend nearby, Slidell agreed to strike out the rolling stock and materials, leaving the road only and its fixtures to revert to the government.<sup>53</sup> An attitude toward municipal franchise so enlightened as this deserves the close attention of any who may be inclined to accept *The Daily True Delta’s* estimate of Slidell as a mere manipulator of intrigue, quite destitute of ideals.

Congress continued its session into June of 1860. But the momentous convention to nominate

<sup>53</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, p. 1599. April 7, 1860.

a new President drew Slidell for a space in April away from his seat in the senate into the political storm center at Charleston. Of Slidell at this convention a pen picture survives, drawn by a skilful hand, for Murat Halstead, its author, was worthy of the occasion which brought him to Charleston, a master journalist, one of the outstanding figures of his profession. He describes Slidell in action:

"within, seated at a round table on which books, newspapers and writing material is scattered about, is a gentleman with long, thin white hair, through which the top of his head blushes like the shell of a boiled lobster. The gentleman has also a cherry-red face, the color being that produced by good health, and good living joined to a florid temperament. His features are well cut, and the expression is that of a thoughtful, hard-working, resolute man of the world. He is a New Yorker by birth, but has made a princely fortune at the New Orleans bar. He is not a very eloquent man in the Senate, but his ability is unquestioned; and it is universally known that he is with the present Administration, the power behind the throne greater than the throne itself. Mr. Buchanan is as wax in his fingers. The name of this gentleman is John Slidell. His special mission here is to see that Stephen A. Douglas is not nominated for the Presidency. If I am not much mistaken, he just now manipulated a few Northeastern men with such marvelous art, that they will presently find that they are exceedingly anxious to defeat the nomination of Douglas, and they will believe that they arrived at the conclusion now coming uppermost in their minds in their own way."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Murat Halstead, *A History of the National Political Conventions of the Current Presidential Campaign*, (Columbus, 1860) pp. 12-13.

I have quoted the description first, but on the previous day Halstead had paid even higher tribute to the political influence of Slidell when he wrote that only the arrogance of the Douglas men induced Slidell to meddle in what was felt to be certain victory. "He will be here this evening, and will operate against Douglas. He is a matchless wire-worker, and the news of his approach causes a flutter. His appearance here means war to the knife. It means also, that the Administration is uneasy on the Douglas question—and feel constrained to use every influence against the Squatty Giant of Illinois, whose nomination would be perdition to Buchanan, Slidell & Co."<sup>55</sup> Two more allusions to Slidell find place in Halstead's account of these critical days. On April 29 he opines that the enemies of Douglas are making little headway. "Slidell and all the rest, have been, as it were, but taking up arms against a sea of troubles, and they have not made much progress toward ending them."<sup>56</sup> On the thirtieth he begins to see results gained by methods which he does not scruple to characterize. Not all followers of Douglas were trustworthy; some were leaky "and whenever the Convention adjourned they were found together buzzing and busy as green flies. It was known that Slidell & Co. were will-

<sup>55</sup> Murat Halstead, *A History of the National Political Conventions of the Current Presidential Campaign*, p. 7. April 21.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60. April 29, 1860.

ing to buy all such fellows, and there was alarm in the camp of Douglas on the platform question."<sup>57</sup> Testimony like this of Halstead's, however uncomplimentary to the political methods of Slidell, betokens a political influence which marked him as one of the great figures of the day. The man who divided his party in 1860, whatever his methods or motives, assumed no mean responsibility for the vast consequences determined by that event.

On returning to Congress from his interesting and fateful absence at Charleston, Slidell was occupied with various matters of routine of small interest or bearing upon his career. But his disapproval of additional bounties to naval officers engaged in the capture of slaves has some interest, though the objection advanced was not that bounties were inappropriate but that those already authorized were sufficient.<sup>58</sup> His defence of himself before the United States senate against a charge of fraud leveled in Louisiana<sup>59</sup> is significant not only for what he said, but

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69, Charleston, April 30, 1860.

<sup>58</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, p. 2211. May 21, 1860.

<sup>59</sup> See *The Daily True Delta*, New Orleans, March 15, 1859, for an extreme statement of the case against Slidell. "The Houmas Fraud.—The Washington correspondent of the *St. Louis Republican*, writing on the 3rd instant, says: An animated discussion, involving much private feeling and the reputation of a distinguished Senator from Louisiana, has been going on for some weeks, before the Committee on Private Land Claims of the Senate. The facts are briefly these: There exists a land claim in the State of Louisiana known as the Houmas claim, covering several

also because he felt obliged to say it. His enemies had long ago fastened upon him the humorous but contemptuous soubriquet of "Houmas." It followed him thereafter. He explained to Congress,

hundred thousand acres of land, lying on the east side of the Mississippi river, about 50 miles above New Orleans. This claim the Government refused to approve, but subsequently a patent was issued, and the settlers were referred to the courts for an investigation and test of title. The Court of Louisiana pronounced the patent void, and ordered it to be cancelled. In the meantime, Senator Slidell had purchased a large interest in the claim and sued for the recovery of the purchase money he had paid. The law maxim of *caveat emptor* prevailed, and he lost the suit. At the close of the last session of Congress, a bill passed, authorizing the location of certain confirmations in Missouri. To this bill, Mr. Benjamin, colleague of Mr. Slidell in the Senate, reported an amendment and succeeded in having it incorporated in said bill as an additional section, confirming the location of the 'Houmas Claim.' This section legislated into the pocket of Mr. Slidell a half million of dollars, as it is charged by the settlers, and turned out of their homes about five hundred families. The sufferers have been before the Senate, complaining of this section of the Missouri bill as a wilful fraud upon them, and as a violation of their rights. The issue was distinctly made, and the result was, the Committee on Private Land Claims, over which Mr. Benjamin still presides, reported a resolution which passed the Senate, and is now before the House, suspending all action under that "second section" until the close of the thirty-sixth Congress. This was a triumph of our settlers, although only a suspension of the law. It indicates very clearly what the final action of Congress will be; and how far this action corroborates the charge of fraud which has been made, I leave for others to decide, as it is no part of my object or purpose to pass in judgment on the case, but only give the facts, curious as I deem them to be, to the readers of the *Republican*."

*The Daily True Delta*, September 19, 1859. . . . "And, moreover, is it not universally conceded that the Honorable Judah P. Benjamin is unrivaled as a statesman and a giant in intellect, towering a cubit above every other man in the United States Senate, and no one can be found to question his legal ability, for he has framed a law for the State of Missouri intended to confirm land claims in Louisiana, in which his colleague only owns ten thousand acres, which it will require half a score of Philadelphia lawyers to explain, an importation not very likely to be acceptable to an overstocked market." . . . Editorial thinks State Legislature will resent this move.

that on land honorably patented he had paid costs, taxes, and assessments to an amount of \$72,000 and that, quite contrary to its rumored value of \$1,000,000, he had offered it on the market at \$40,000, with no bids received. \$15,000 was its assessed valuation. The land was bought in 1835, when a wilderness, and depended on titles dating back to 1777. He had bought the land, known as the Houmas tract, in partnership with others. All had acted in good faith, their claim being fortified by a court decision of the Louisiana Supreme Court in the case of *Slidell v. Richter*, (3 Annual Reports, p. 199) delivered February, 1848. Slidell here quoted the opinion of the court, no less cheerfully, perhaps, because it included a personal compliment to himself as "an attorney-at-law of high standing in his profession."<sup>60</sup>

The original grant of Houmas Indian lands was, however, somewhat vague. Uncertainty was increased, moreover, by additional grants, vaguely defined. Thus Slidell and his associates acquired land whose surveys were unquestionably open to dispute. Difficulties arose when settlers poured in. Efforts to secure from Congress a definition of the claims offered leverage to the enemies of Slidell to raise the cry of fraud, in which they were joined by disappointed settlers. The whole situation presented to Slidell, and to his friend

<sup>60</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, p. 2433. May 29, 1860.



Judah P. Benjamin, who heartily supported him in the Houmas claims, many causes of annoyance. In the uncertainty of boundaries there was room for real disagreement. But there is nothing in the private career of Slidell to warrant history in paying heed to the cries of fraud which his political enemies, in the venom of the period, delighted to raise.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin* (Philadelphia, 1907), pp. 165-170. It must be admitted, however, that in political life, he was willing to build and maintain a machine by every means at his command. Cf. *The Daily True Delta*, New Orleans, July 29, 1859. . . . "Capt. J. K. Duncan was, under the late administration, [Pierce] appointed superintendent engineer of two or three public works, among others to superintend the repairs of the United States Mint building here, and the construction of a New Marine Hospital. While Gen. Pierce was yet in the Presidency and Guthrie was Secretary of the Treasury, endeavors were made by Slidell and his associates to obtain an influence for selfish political purposes over the laborers employed upon the works, which Capt. Duncan superintended, through that officer, under whom there were, perhaps, some 300 men. To these appeals Capt. D. properly replied that he was a government officer, unconnected with any political party or clique, and interference with the political course of the laborers employed under him he neither deemed proper in itself nor compatible with his duty to the government which employed him. He furthermore refused to accept the services of working men recommended by the same parties for political objects only, and declared that no man should be put upon the works nor discharged from them for political reasons alone. From that time Slidell has pursued Capt. Duncan and his clerk, Capt. J. R. Smith, a gentleman of fine attainments and the most irreproachable life, with all the vindictiveness and tenacity of the most groveling and unscrupulous minds . . . [With Guthrie his tactics failed.]

"It was reserved for the present head of the Treasury Department to stoop to the meanness of pandering to Slidell's demands, and not having a pretext for dismissing Capt. Duncan, whose duties were always capably and faithfully performed, he abolished the office or place which he held. In this connection, it is as well to mention that the individual whom Slidell importuned Guthrie to supplant Capt. Duncan with, was one who had attempted to bribe, with an offer of six thousand dollars, a gentleman engaged



When Congress adjourned in June, 1860, another era in Slidell's life was closed, the busy, important life of a senator in a Union not divided. Clouds were gathering; a storm was brewing. Lincoln had been nominated, and the Democracy had broken ranks. A prophet might foresee disaster, but in the lull before the storm hope still lay in the ballot box. Meanwhile, forces were shaping which should bring Slidell for a moment, at least, into the focus of a world's attention.

under Capt. D. on the Marine Hospital Building, to procure him a contract. This proceeding of Slidell's, in this particular case, is but a type of all that has been done at Washington since the installation of the pet son of the old Keystone State in the Presidency. . . . Here in Louisiana, Slidellians fill almost every office, at least the chief high places . . ."

## CHAPTER VII

### SECESSION

IT is probably no exaggeration to say that in 1856, as boss of the Democratic party, Slidell dominated the political situation. He was able to impose upon the Democracy and upon the country the candidate of his choice. In 1860 this was emphatically not the case. Neither in the party nor with the country was Slidell a preponderating figure. Buchananism was a waning force. But the comments of Slidell upon a passing scene, in which he was still an influence to be reckoned with, gain in the importance of the events alluded to what they lose from the subsidiary influence of the observer.

Immediately upon announcement of Lincoln's nomination, he communicated to General A. G. Carter, the president of the state Democratic convention at Port Hudson, Louisiana, his opinion of its significance.

We have this day received the news of the nomination made by the Black Republican Convention at Chicago. I had supposed that Mr. Seward would certainly have been their candidate for the Presidency, and had the Charleston Convention resulted in the harmonious adoption of a

sound platform and the nomination of a man pledged to carry out its principles, I would have preferred that a direct issue should have been presented to the people of the free States by the nomination of Mr. Seward. That issue would, in my opinion, have been, shall the Union be preserved or destroyed? Mr. Lincoln may be, and probably is, as hostile to the institution of slavery as Mr. Seward, but his record on that subject, which I have not yet had the opportunity to examine, is comparatively obscure and incomplete, and his election, especially if the contest be complicated by any division in our own ranks, would not present as absolute and unmistakable a test of Northern sentiment as that of Mr. Seward."<sup>1</sup>

The division hinted at by Slidell did come to pass, and among the fragments of the Democratic party Slidell, who was originally and essentially a moderate, found himself supporting the most extreme wing. A life long opponent of the Whigs could not feel at home under the Union leadership of Bell and Everett. Neither could he accompany men of similar convictions to his own when allegiance to the injured and hated Douglas was implied. Nothing remained but to uphold Breckinridge and Lane, even though in so doing he became the ally of men whose anti-Union sentiments he had previously opposed. Having made his choice, he supported the ticket with his accustomed energy. His campaigning methods are described with much vivacity by *The Daily Delta*.

Last evening, quite unexpectedly, the Young Democracy—the Young Men's Breckinridge and Lane Club—of

<sup>1</sup> Slidell to Gen. A. G. Carter. May 19, 1860. Quoted in *The Daily Delta*, May 24, 1860.

this city, together with the masses of true Democrats, many from Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, that were visiting in our midst, appeared in front of the St. Charles Hotel, and, led by a large and well arranged band, proceeded to serenade the Hon. John Slidell, who is stopping *pro tem.* at the St. Charles Hotel.

We were no less surprised than the honorable gentleman himself, for we little expected, however much deserving, such an ovation on the part of the young Democracy. After the large crowd had gathered in front of the hotel, and the torches were placed in a position to shed a brilliancy over the immense gathering of human beings present, fire-works went up in the joyfulness and enthusiasm of the moment, and loud cheers were given for the "Hon. John Slidell," and repeated with enthusiastic cheers. At 10 o'clock the Hon. Mr. Slidell appeared, accompanied by friends, on the balcony of the hotel and was greeted rapturously. He was evidently laboring under physical prostration from his recent journey hither from Washington City, and also from a severe cold—hence his remarks were scarcely audible but to those immediately near him. By the aid of our pencil and notebook, we succeeded in gaining the following points of his impromptu address.

Slidell paid his respects to Douglas as no true leader, but a betrayer of his party who meant to aid Lincoln and to succeed him four years hence as the Black Republican candidate. Bell, while a man of honor, was not the man of the hour. "If you want skillful pilots at the helm, and brave captains on the deck, my friends, choose Breckinridge and Lane. (Loud and prolonged cheers.)" He reminded his auditors that he was a Union man, but a southerner too. Louisiana must have equal rights with Massachusetts, or equality in the Union

existed no longer. As one who had always voted a straight Democratic ticket, he maintained consistency by voting for its "truly accredited standard bearers." So far as Louisiana was concerned, the Douglas ticket was run only for effect, the real contest lying between Breckinridge and Bell. (Loud cries of "go and take \$100,000, and you can buy out the Douglas party down the street.")

The speaker ventured to predict that Douglas would fail to secure the electoral vote of a single state, that Bell could not carry any free state, but might by fusion obtain some Pennsylvania and New Jersey votes, and that unless Lincoln should control the electoral college, Congress would have to choose between Lincoln, Breckinridge and Bell. The whole South, except perhaps Missouri and Kentucky, would go for Breckinridge. But the real issue depended upon Pennsylvania, where the party had a good chance unless circumvented by Forney and the immediate friends of Douglas.

Slidell then paid his compliments to his hearers, hoped soon to meet them individually in their clubs, and declared that he rejoiced at "much that is nobly promising in your progress so manly, so Southern; may you have God speed in your work."

It is easy to perceive in the occasion and in the speech itself, incomplete as were its reporter's notes, the secret of Slidell's influence. There was in him a strange blending of the polished gentle-

man and cultivated man of the world with the mob-moving demagogue. Charm he unquestionably possessed, or a high spirited crowd of youths who had heard scarcely a word he said would not have broken up in the mood which it did, for the exuberant reporter goes on to say that

"The honorable speaker then retired, and a more enthusiastic, cheering and rejoiced assemblage has not been in this city for many years. The band played vigorously patriotic airs, the vast assemblage cheered and recheered, and though it was evident that Mr. Slidell was inaudible to two-thirds of his auditory, still his presence as a public servant, who could render an account of his stewardship, was fully appreciated by a grateful people. Our report, necessarily hurried, does very little justice to the honorable gentleman on the occasion."<sup>2</sup>

On the eighteenth and nineteenth of October he was slated, with Jefferson Davis "and other speakers of distinction," to address a rally at Selma, Alabama. "Let there be a grand turnout of the unterrified of Alabama"<sup>3</sup> was the prayer of *The Daily Delta*, which, as cannot have escaped notice, looked upon Slidell with a far more favorable eye than did its near name-sake, *The Daily True Delta*.

The efforts of Slidell were successful locally. After the recent overwhelming victory over Soulé, his leadership in Louisiana was beyond dispute. The account of the election as forwarded by Slidell to Buchanan is of additional interest as the last

<sup>2</sup> *The Daily Delta*, September 18, 1860.

<sup>3</sup> *The Daily Delta*, October 4, 1860.

letter to the President written in the old time vein of friendship and good will. For one of the sacrifices which each was soon to make to the cause of his adoption was a friendship deeply rooted in the years.

My dear Sir

We have carried Louisiana over Bell by a plurality of about 3000—Very many of the Bell party will act with us in our future movements & a majority of the native citizens who voted for Douglas; but here in the city, seven eighths at least of the votes for Douglas were cast by the Irish & Germans, who are at heart abolitionists. They can easily be taken care of. Louisiana will act with her sister States of the South. I deeply regret the embarrassments which will surround you during the remainder of your term, and I need scarcely say that I will do everything in my power to modify them as much as possible & to avert any hostile action during your administration.

I see no probability of preserving the Union, nor indeed do I consider it desirable to do so if we could. My only regret will be the separation from the small but gallant band of democrats who have stood by us so manfully in the final contest.

Our Governor will probably convene the Legislature at an early day, when a Convention will be called to appoint delegates to confer with the other Slave States—It may be necessary for me to remain here until January, but if you think my presence in Washington desirable, I will endeavour to leave here towards the close of this month—There is a vacant Judgeship in New Mexico. if there be no urgent necessity to fill it at once, I would be gratified that the appointment be not made at present.

Very faithfully & respy

Your friend &c

John Slidell

New Orleans,

11 Novr '60.

To the *President*.



Once more, and for the last time, in Congress, Slidell was frankly the ambassador from Louisiana, the advance agent of Secession. As such it was no part of his plan to antagonize the states of the upper Mississippi valley. If possible, the old alliance of South and West must be perpetuated. Slidell undertook to pledge "to every citizen of the country whose streams flow into the Mississippi the free navigation of the river and the free interchange of all of the agricultural products of the valley of the Mississippi."<sup>4</sup>

In this new rôle, it was inevitable that, if the President evinced the slightest hint of nationalism, Slidell should find himself in opposition to his old friend. The press, anticipating such an outcome, announced it in advance. On December eighteenth the following telegram reached the Associated Press. "Senator Slidell, of Louisiana, charged President Buchanan with imbecility, imputing to him the cause of the present troubles and the authorship of the present crisis." To this, Slidell replied on the floor of the senate that there was no shadow of foundation for the dispatch, that he had never spoken in the senate upon the President's message, the resolutions of the Senator from Kentucky, nor, even in a remote way, upon any of the difficulties which were agitating the country. What was more, he had expressed

<sup>4</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 137. December 19, 1860.

no such sentiments to anyone outside the senate, either by speech or in writing, as were alleged in the telegram. Though this was not the opportune moment for its expression, his admiration for the President was very high.<sup>5</sup> A little later he paid his compliments to the press in a way to leave little doubt of his sentiments. "If it be well understood that the mendacity of the reporters of the associated press is so notorious, so patent throughout the country, that every Senator on this floor admits it, I have obtained everything that I wish."<sup>6</sup>

So far as the official records indicate, the inevitable breach occurred when Buchanan shook off his fatal lethargy sufficiently to dismiss from the war portfolio John B. Floyd, the most disloyal of his advisers. It was Slidell himself who offered a resolution requesting from the President the reasons for his action together with an explanation as to why the new appointment had not been communicated to the senate.<sup>7</sup> On the following day, he supported his position by elaborate arguments on the necessity of senatorial confirmation of appointments.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 131. December 19, 1860.

<sup>6</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 250. January 5, 1861.

<sup>7</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 283. January 9, 1861.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304. January 10, 1861.

Though the President made the desired report, it was not to be anticipated that Slidell would concur in its reasoning. On the twenty-third he followed the original resolution with two others: one that the reasons advanced by the President for delay in submitting the nomination as well as for making the nomination that he did were not satisfactory; the other, that the President in making a six months appointment of an acting secretary of war, without consulting the senate, in session at the time, both exceeded his constitutional authority and violated the Act of 1795 to which he himself referred in his defence. Action of this sort, said Slidell, "if suffered to pass by without express dissent, would establish a precedent alike dangerous to the principles on which our system of Government was established, and in derogation of the constitutional rights and privileges of the Senate."<sup>9</sup>

In harmony with Slidell's evident intention to cripple the war department by upholding Floyd, was his similar protest against the removal of the commandant of West Point. On this score he wrote Buchanan a formal note demanding to know whether the removal met with the President's approval.<sup>10</sup> Buchanan replied, with equal formality, that he upheld the secretary of war in all things

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517. January 23, 1861.

<sup>10</sup> George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, II, 445. Slidell to Buchanan, Washington, January 27, 1861.

and that the latter's official acts were his own.<sup>11</sup> One week later Slidell bade farewell to the senate. If he felt any emotion at leaving the goal of his ambitions and a scene where he had played a considerable part, it was not apparent in a speech which was singularly devoid of sentiment, cold and almost menacing, but clear-cut and well reasoned, even to the premise that southern privateers would destroy our commerce, but mistaken in its prediction that foreign nations would inevitably intervene. The issue of war, and Slidell was sufficient of a realist to believe that war was by no means impossible, lay with the free states. Choose whichever course they preferred, the South would meet them on their own ground.<sup>12</sup>

From his first setting foot in New Orleans, Slidell had so completely identified himself with Louisiana that there could be no question of his action when secession was determined upon. In view, however, of his presence in the senate when that action was taken, and in view also of the Union preferences which he had from time to time recorded, natural enough in a man of his background and associations, most of all, perhaps, in view of his identification so intimately with a President of all the states united,—for it will be remembered that one of his reasons for champion-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 445. January 29, 1861.

<sup>12</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 720. February 5, 1861.

ing Buchanan was the desire to elect a moderate who should conciliate antagonistic interests,—in view of all these circumstances, it would scarcely seem that Slidell can be regarded as a fire-eater or in any sense as a rabid secessionist. In 1850, certainly, his section was decidedly in advance of him in that respect. In 1853 he believed that mention of him as timber for Pierce's cabinet was due to confidence in him as the chief Union man south of Virginia. There can be no doubt of his desire to make the Buchanan administration a success, and that success would necessarily be measured by its ability to hold together the Union. All the outstanding features of his career, therefore, point to Slidell as a follower rather than a leader in secession. Moreover, and this is worth considering, when the South made its decision, Slidell was sixty-eight years old, at a season in life when one is inclined to weigh a step so momentous. Age and riches alike counseled conservatism.<sup>13</sup> It was not, therefore, until after the nomination and election of Lincoln that Slidell's expressions took on a menacing character. And even when circumstances brought him to the parting of the ways with Buchanan, it is pleasant to reflect that their ancient friendship, to the last a genuine personal

<sup>13</sup> *The Daily Delta*, New Orleans, August 7, 1862, quotes a report from the Treasurer's Department to the effect that Slidell's taxes for 1861 in New Orleans, unpaid because of war conditions, amounted to \$3,178.50. He was one of the heaviest tax-payers in New Orleans.

affection, far deeper than a mere political alliance, ended without bitterness or recrimination.

As one of the foremost men in the newly constituted Confederacy, Slidell was certain to find his talents in requisition. Here his past pointed toward his future. The Mexican mission, the Central American offer, the bond negotiations in London, the political maneuvers which had baffled Soulé, his choice by Buchanan for the French mission—all combined to suggest him to Jefferson Davis as a diplomatist of the Confederacy. A much abler man than James M. Mason, he might reasonably have been selected for the London post, but Paris, too, was of utmost importance, and Slidell's aptitudes were, perhaps, more calculated to please Napoleon than Lord John Russell. At any rate, it is as much a tribute to the sagacity of Jefferson Davis and his advisers as to the ability and enterprise of Slidell that he was selected to be the successor of Benjamin Franklin at a court which once before had smiled upon Americans in revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Slidell's journey to the post assigned to him was featured by an incident of tremendous moment in the diplomatic history of the United States. But

<sup>14</sup> Sumner took vigorous exception to the characterization of Slidell as a second Franklin. See an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* for November, 1863, reprinted in *Works*, X. 256-258. "The present struggle is characteristically represented by John Slidell, whose great fame is from electioneering frauds to control a Presidential election; so that his character is fitly drawn, when it is said that he thrust fraudulent votes into the ballot-box, and whips into the hands of taskmasters."

the Trent Affair, which looms so large in the story of the Civil War, was of less importance to the captives than it was to the captors. Indeed, the whole affair tended both to advertise and to simplify the mission.

Its outline was simple. Slidell, his wife and four children, his secretary, Eustis, with his wife, and Mason, with his secretary, MacFarland, made their way to Charleston, where it was hinted, in order to mislead any Federals lying off the port, that they would depart on the *Nashville*. This ship did put out to sea on the tenth of October, but without any passengers of distinction. They left, instead, on the night of the twelfth on the small blockade runner, *Theodora*, and received two days later a friendly welcome at the British port of New Providence, Nassau. Finding that British ships sailing from here touched at New York, the commissioners pushed on in the *Theodora* to Cardenas, Cuba, whence they proceeded overland to Havana, there to await a British steamer bound for a less hazardous port. While in Havana they were treated with marked civility by the British consul, and introduced by him to the Governor, who, however, declined to recognize them officially, receiving them only as travelers of personal distinction. Their passage was duly engaged for the British mail steamer *Trent*. But, before they embarked, Captain Wilkes of the United States sloop, *San Jacinto*, had learned of



their presence in Havana and of their intentions. Without any communication or authorization from the navy department and over the protests of his own Lieutenant Fairfax, but fortified by what he believed were precedents recited in certain books on maritime law, which he carried in the cabin, he determined to lie in wait for the *Trent* and to seize the commissioners and their dispatches. This he did on the eighth of November, halting the *Trent* by means of a shell fired across her bow. The dispatches he altogether failed to secure, but the agents were taken after a *pro forma* show of force. The *Trent*, with the ladies of the party, proceeded on its way, and the commissioners and their secretaries were conveyed forthwith to Boston and imprisoned at Fort Warren.<sup>15</sup>

The excitement which prevailed in both the United States and England when news spread of Captain Wilkes's exploit and the near approach to war which the wise pressure of the Prince Consort and the timely action of Seward and Sumner averted are part of the history of the times. There is still room for question, however, in accordance with one's preference for the Adams<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, December 7, 1861, unfriendly even in this crisis, quotes with glee the *New York Times*, November 25, "Arrival at Boston of Commodore Wilkes, with Slidell and Mason. . . . After him came Slidell, with a somewhat less timid air, but still his knees every now and then betraying by their shaky motions the trepidation which their owner strove to conceal."

<sup>16</sup> Charles Francis Adams, "The Trent Affair. An Historical Retrospect," see *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, XLV. 35-76.

or the Dana<sup>17</sup> interpretation, as to which country, America or Great Britain, gave the other greater provocation in these exasperating days. But there is no doubt whatever as to the folly of forcing upon worldly and even cynical men like these envoys of revolution the unexpected but welcome rôle of martyrs.

At Fort Warren the prisoners passed their time, in some degree of physical discomfort, it is true, but with the cheerful certainty that every day of their captivity increased the probability of war with Great Britain, and in consequence the complete success of their cause. Even their physical wants, in spite of the madness which seized all classes in Massachusetts from Governor Andrew down, were ministered to by Good Samaritans, who had known them socially in happier days. Prominent among these were William Appleton<sup>18</sup> and Robert C. Winthrop,<sup>19</sup> who incurred considerable odium among fanatics by gifts of wine, fruits, and other delicacies. The hardships of detention and the contemplation of a hoped-for war were alike ended when, on January 1, 1862, the captives were removed secretly to Provincetown, in order to avoid the clamors of a Boston mob, and from thence permitted to embark on the

<sup>17</sup> Richard Henry Dana, "The Trent Affair. An Aftermath." *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, March, 1912.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Abbott Green, "James Murray Mason and John Slidell in Fort Warren, Boston Harbor," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, December, 1911, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Francis Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 27. Boston, 1912.

British sloop of war *Rinaldo*<sup>20</sup> and from it to be transferred to an ocean liner. The journey, so dramatically interrupted, was soon completed, and the commissioners entered upon their residence abroad.<sup>21</sup>

The significance attached by the North to the mission and the bitterness felt at surrendering the commissioners find pungent expression in the words of Charles Sumner, which, in their very severity, constitute a tribute to the importance of their subject. Of the commissioners he declared:

These two old men were citizens of the United States, and for many years Senators. Arrogant, audacious, persistent, perfidious,—one was author of the fugitive Slave

<sup>20</sup> *The Daily True Delta*, New Orleans, January 14, 1862.

"The release of Messrs. Mason and Slidell—Their Departure for Europe—The *Boston Journal* of the 2d gives the following account of the departure of the Southern Commissioners and their secretaries . . .

"Mr. Slidell was somewhat sulky, and not at all pleased at going in such an unostentatious manner, and in such a vessel. He evidently expected that a steamer would come here especially for them. Part of his ill-nature may be owing to his health, which has not been good for some weeks, keeping him pretty close to his room, although he has not called for medical aid."

*The Daily True Delta*, New Orleans, May 7, 1862, in an editorial pursued him with vindictiveness into exile. "The infamous Buchanan and his Slidell gang, and the hideous Know-Nothing treason, joined hands against us; but we survived the conspiracy, as we hope to do the machinations of all similar combinations and unholy leagues. To the filthy dregs of these consumptive combinations we would give the assurance of our most distinguished consideration, together with the expression of our confident belief that, if our lives be spared, no matter how present troubles may result, we shall in the future, as we have in the past, break many a lance in the cause of civil and religious liberty and democratic republican government." . . .

<sup>21</sup> The standard account of The Trent Affair, though published in 1896, is still Thomas L. Harris, *The Trent Affair* (Indianapolis, 1896).

Bill, and the other was chief author of the filibustering system which has disgraced our national name and disturbed our national peace. Occupying places of trust and power in the service of the country, they conspired against it, and at last the secret traitors and conspirators became open rebels. The present Rebellion, surpassing in proportions and in wickedness any rebellion in history, was from the beginning quickened and promoted by their untiring energies. That country to which they owed love, honor, and obedience, they betrayed and gave over to violence and outrage. Treason, conspiracy, and rebellion, each in succession, acted through them. The incalculable expenditures now tasking the national resources,—the untold derangement of affairs, not only at home, but abroad,—the levy of armies without example,—the devastation of extended spaces of territory,—the plunder of peaceful ships on the ocean, and the slaughter of fellow-citizens on the murderous battle-field,—such are some of the consequences proceeding directly from them.<sup>22</sup>

If, in truth, consequences like these already flowed from the conduct of Mason and Slidell, it is certain that their effect was not diminished by the mission overseas.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Sumner, *Complete Works*, VIII. 32-33.

## CHAPTER VIII

### AT THE COURT OF NAPOLEON III

THE years which Slidell passed as Confederate commissioner at the court of Napoleon III were more conducive to fame than to contentment. Talents of a high order were requisite for success, and these Slidell possessed and exerted. But success in negotiation was predetermined by success on the battlefield. It was impossible that the diplomat succeed where his country failed. As in Mexico, where Slidell had won his spurs in diplomacy, the difficulties were insurmountable. If greatness depended wholly upon good fortune, Slidell's claim to recognition would be limited to his various achievements in moulding Louisiana to his will, and in nominating his friend Buchanan to the Presidency. But greatness is also measured by the amount and intelligence of effort put forth, as well as by results achieved, and by such a test the vexations of an impossible mission reveal the incumbent at his best. Certainly Slidell recognized at Paris the opportunity of a life time to serve the South, his country, and to win laurels

for himself. The alternating hopes and disappointments of this crowning period of Slidell's career can be followed, fortunately, in his own letters to James M. Mason, his confrère at London, who of all men was best qualified to sympathize with him.

In the first letter of the series, written from Paris on February 5, 1862, Slidell admits to Mason that "recognition [of the Confederacy] may long be delayed but I am very sanguine as to the speedy breaking up of the blockade."<sup>1</sup> He counted much on the friendly disposition of the French authorities and was proportionately disappointed at the coldness of his first reception by M. Thouvenel, the minister of foreign affairs. Thouvenel denied that his government had been in correspondence with Great Britain concerning the blockade, and "his denial . . . was so categorical and unqualified" says Slidell, "that I was obliged to believe it, but conversations with other officials have since led me to doubt it."<sup>2</sup> The minister of the interior, Persigny, a close friend of the Emperor, was more cordial than Thouvenel,<sup>3</sup> and Slidell set store upon his good offices and those of the president of the council of state, M. Baroche,<sup>4</sup> whose son had previously been placed

<sup>1</sup> February 5, 1862. Except where otherwise indicated the references in this chapter are to the Mason papers in the Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup> February 12, 1862.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



under obligations to the Slidells for hospitality extended during a visit to New Orleans.<sup>5</sup> The minister of finance, M. Fould,<sup>6</sup> was also among those who gave Slidell an early audience. His conclusion from conversations with these men and others was that "the Emperor's sympathies are with us—that he would immediately raise the blockade and very soon recognize us, if England would only make the first step, however small, in that direction, but for the present at least he is decided that she shall take the initiative."<sup>7</sup> Slidell's French friends told him that they had no wish to be the cat in the fable and to draw out chestnuts for British benefit.

Slidell had a faculty for facing facts, and his first estimate of Napoleon's intentions proved to be final. Napoleon's friendly advances were always forestalled of fruition by British reluctance to coöperate and, ultimately, by Confederate reverses, which intensified the risks of interference by outsiders. The first of these disappointments came to Slidell in March, 1862. Notwithstanding the autocracy of the Emperor, the Corps Législatif was in some measure a barometer of opinion, at least to the extent that many of the speakers drew their inspiration from the imperial fountain, and Slidell watched its debates upon the American blockade with a passionate interest. In a speech

<sup>5</sup> See letter of February 5, 1862.

<sup>6</sup> February 12, 1862.

<sup>7</sup> February 12, 1862.



delivered March 13, 1862, by M. Billault, a government spokesman in the Chamber, he heard the knell of French intervention. "If instead of the defeats at Roanoke and Donelson, we could have had some decisive victory to announce to the world, I believe that a very different view would have been taken by Mr. Billault. As it is, I can only look forward with hope not unmingled with anxiety, to the news which we must soon have of an important battle at or near Nashville."<sup>8</sup>

The entire month was a period of the most anxious suspense. It confirmed Slidell's impression that Napoleon would do nothing without England, being "determined to hold on to her alliance on any terms which she might dictate."<sup>9</sup> He asked Mason for a frank statement of the London situation, for if nothing was to be hoped from Palmerston and Russell, "the sooner our people know that we have nothing to expect from this side of the water and that we must rely exclusively on our own resources, the better."<sup>10</sup> Before another two weeks, renewed negotiations between Napoleon and England lifted Slidell out of the slough of despond, and he wrote Mason in a totally different vein:

I have at last some good news to give you. Mr. Lindsay has had a long interview with the Emperor, who is prepared to act at once decidedly in our favor. he has

<sup>8</sup> March 14, 1862.

<sup>9</sup> March 28, 1862.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

always been ready to do so and has twice made representations to England, but has received evasive responses. He has now for the third time given them but in a more decided tone. Mr. Lindsay will give you all the particulars. This is entirely confidential, but you can say to Lord Campbell, Mr. Gregory etc. that I now have positive and *authentic* evidence that France only waits the assent of England for recognition and other more cogent measures.<sup>11</sup>

But these approaches of Napoleon were unofficial. With characteristic subterfuge, he acted through the Englishman, Lindsay, rather than through his own ambassador at London. Russell refused to negotiate outside of regular channels, and Napoleon's third move shared the fate of his former efforts. Lindsay told his story to Disraeli, however, and from him gained what promised to be a new light on the situation. Disraeli declared that Lord John Russell was bound by a secret agreement with Mr. Seward not to break the blockade and not to recognize the Confederacy. But Disraeli hinted that this agreement was irksome to Russell and that, if Napoleon himself would only take the lead, British opinion would support him so strongly that Russell would be obliged, with only pretended reluctance, to give way in order to avoid a change of ministry.<sup>12</sup>

Napoleon was not too well pleased with Lindsay's report of the reception of his overtures.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> April 12, 1862.

<sup>12</sup> Summary of despatch No. 6, J. Slidell to Hon. J. P. Benjamin, secretary of state, April 18, 1862.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

He recollected his former grievance at Lord John Russell's conduct in forwarding copies of French official representations on American affairs to Lord Lyons, who in turn communicated them to Mr. Seward. But he seized upon the explanation of the Russell-Seward agreement, and was half inclined to act upon Disraeli's advice, on the principle that "he could not consent that his people should continue to suffer from the action of the Federal government."<sup>14</sup> A friendly appeal might suffice, especially if accompanied by a naval demonstration on the American coast. But action would better await the naval decision at New Orleans, whose capture Napoleon did not anticipate, but must take into possible account. All this in confidence.

Characteristically Machiavellian was the scheme which Napoleon at this time evolved to make his future course toward the American question appear like a response to public demand. "Measures have been taken," says Slidell in his report to the department of state at Richmond, "to procure petitions from the chambers of commerce of the principal cities, asking the intervention of the Emperor to restore commercial relations with the Southern States."<sup>15</sup> Editorial comment in the semi-official journals, *Constitution*, *Patrie*, and

<sup>14</sup> Summary of despatch No. 6, J. Slidell to Hon. J. P. Benjamin, secretary of state, April 18, 1862.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

*Pays*<sup>16</sup> coincided with reports that, with the exception of M. Thouvenel, the entire cabinet favored a vigorous American policy. Even more reassuring was a burst of activity in the Mediterranean fleet, which was ordered to lay in stores for three months. All in all, in the closing days of April, 1862, Slidell had reason for contentment. "I am not without hope," he wrote Mason, "that the Emperor may act alone."<sup>17</sup>

Even the fall of New Orleans failed to dispel the illusion of cheer. On May 2 Persigny gave Slidell definite assurance that the "Confederacy would soon be recognized," "this between ourselves—as he talks to me very unreservedly and relies on my discretion."<sup>18</sup> Even Thouvenel relaxed under the new geniality and confided to Slidell that Mercier, who had gone on Napoleon's behalf to investigate conditions in the Confederacy, had made a favorable report as to southern resources and determination. To Thouvenel's query as to the significance of the loss of New Orleans, Slidell was obliged to own that "it would be most disastrous, as it would give the enemy the control of the Mississippi and all its tributaries, but that it would not in any way modify the fixed purpose of our people to carry on the war even to our own extermination."<sup>19</sup> Slidell, on his side,

<sup>16</sup> April 28, 1862.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> May 3, 1862.

<sup>19</sup> May 14, 1862.

pressed an inquiry into Thouvenel's views as to Lord Palmerston's assertion that British and French policies were identical. Thouvenel evaded the answer by saying that French action had been purely verbal.<sup>20</sup> The interview was, on the whole, satisfactory to Slidell, though a warning that only great Confederate victories at Corinth or in Virginia would warrant European recognition should have impressed him as ominous.

On the sixteenth of May Slidell received fresh intimations of the Emperor's good intentions—these from M. Billault, whose March speech had caused him such anxiety. "He assures me," writes Slidell, "that the Emperor and all the ministers are favorable to our cause, have been so for the last year and are now quite as warmly so as they have been. Mr. Thouvenel is of course excepted, but even he has no hostility."<sup>21</sup> The darker side of the picture was that Billault, in contradiction to Thouvenel, declared that the Emperor was far from satisfied with Mercier's visit to Richmond.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, McClellan's Peninsular Campaign was in full progress, and Slidell looked for the capture of Richmond. "Things look gloomy," he admitted to Mason, "but if we can repulse the enemy before Richmond and hold it (of which I

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* A part of this letter is printed in Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Confederacy*, II. 251.

<sup>21</sup> May 16, 1862.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

feel by no means confident) and Beauregard defeat Halleck, I think that we will have a good prospect of early recognition. Even if we abandon Richmond retiring in good order beyond James River and we achieve a decided victory in the neighbourhood of Corinth, I shall entertain hopes of being recognised."<sup>23</sup> He suggested to Mason that it would be well for both, in the event of a military success in either quarter, to act in concert in a demand for immediate recognition.

But such a plan involved a number of objections. The governments of Great Britain and France were not equally friendly to the Southern cause. Joint action might be premature. On the other hand, too early a demand upon Paris might isolate London completely. The difficulties a battling confederation would have in forcing recognition from unwilling powers were really insuperable, and Slidell fell back into the pessimism from which the promises of Napoleon had temporarily lifted him. "I am heartily tired and disgusted," he complains, "with my position here and so far as I am personally concerned, if our recognition is to be indefinitely postponed, I would very much prefer to bring my mission to an immediate close, but of course I must remain at my post however disagreeable, until authorised by the President to withdraw."<sup>24</sup> In these views of Sli-

<sup>23</sup> May 27, 1862.

<sup>24</sup> June 1, 1862.

dell upon the desirability of action or a prompt withdrawal from Europe, Mason concurred.<sup>25</sup>

But new issues arose to make a permanent residence desirable, even in default of recognition. One of these was Mexico. Slidell's first reference to Mexican developments was in an outline to Mason of a projected letter to Thouvenel. "I am inclined . . . to touch upon the Mexican question, saying that while foreign occupation of that country would excite the most violent opposition at the North, we, far from sharing such a feeling, would be pleased to see a steady, respectable, responsible government established there soon."<sup>26</sup>

Distance did not blind Slidell to the vast significance of the military decisions pending East and West, and in the middle of June he again sounded Mason on the proper course for each to pursue when the victory should be heralded. To Slidell, London looked like the most promising field for an aggressive demand.<sup>27</sup> He regarded Russell as the chief obstacle in the Confederate path, but felt that a formal demand, backed by a victorious army, might induce even him to yield to the policy of Palmerston and the other members of the cabinet. If, however, Great Britain showed a disposition to mediate between North and South, "it would perhaps be better to postpone the demand

<sup>25</sup> See Slidell, June 6, 1862.

<sup>26</sup> June 6, 1862.

<sup>27</sup> June 14, 1862.



for formal recognition as such an offer would be virtually to recognize us."<sup>28</sup>

To Billault Slidell expressed himself as favoring recognition far rather than mediation,<sup>29</sup> saying "that it was impossible to overestimate the importance of such a step, that if it had been taken last summer the war would long since have terminated. That the same effect would now follow in a few months, it would give courage to the peace party at the North to speak out in time to operate upon the approaching Congressional elections."<sup>30</sup>

Billault, however, gave Slidell no encouragement to think that recognition would soon be forthcoming and reiterated that the French determination to act only in concurrence with England was unchanged. He recommended him to consult Thouvenel once more<sup>31</sup> and admitted that the Confederate attitude toward French intervention in Mexico might have an influence upon the question of recognition, the more so as Slidell took occasion to renew his assurances "that all we desired there was the establishment of a respectable and responsible government and were quite indifferent as to its form, and that he was well aware that such were not the sentiments of the Washington government."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> June 14, 1862.

<sup>29</sup> June 17, 1862.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Hope deferred was making the heart sick, and on June 21 Slidell unburdened himself in a very correct analysis of events. He put no confidence in Lord Palmerston. Disraeli and Walpole were well intentioned but futile. There was no use in applying to Thouvenel.

I have seen enough since I have been here to be convinced that nothing that I can say or do will advance for a single day the action of this government, and I am very much inclined to tender my resignation: The position of our representatives in Europe is painful and almost humiliating. it might be tolerated if they could be consoled by the reflection that their presence was in any way advantageous to their cause, but I am rather disposed to believe that we would have done better to withdraw after our first interviews with Russell and Thouvenel.<sup>33</sup>

More patiently, but no more optimistically, he wrote a few days later, "I think that it is now more evident than ever that England will do nothing that may offend the Lincoln government, and I shall await, as patiently as I can, the course of events."<sup>34</sup> Five months of his mission had expired, and Slidell had made little progress. In the social world, he was obtaining a recognition that was soon to result in an acquaintance and even a friendship with the Emperor. In the political, he was pitted against forces too mighty for even the most adroit of diplomats to overcome. These forces, nevertheless, seemed for the moment to favor Slidell when McClellan's withdrawal from

<sup>33</sup> June 21, 1862.

<sup>34</sup> June 29, 1862.

Richmond admitted the failure of the Peninsular Campaign. He wrote to Mason to reassure him of Napoleon's good-will. "I hear that the attempt is renewed to excite the impression in England that the Emperor is not disposed to recognise us and that the hitch is here, not at London. You can run no risk in giving any such report a most emphatic contradiction."<sup>35</sup> Persigny gave him once more to understand that intervention was imminent. But he realized the difficulty of Mason's position because of Palmerston's recent display of strength in Parliament. "Indeed that august body seems to be as much afraid of him, as the urchins of a village school of the birch of their pedagogue."<sup>36</sup>

At last, in July, 1862, came an interview with the Emperor. Slidell had won the confidence of the Emperor's friends. It remained for him to bring Napoleon himself into the circle of his influence. The improved military position of the Confederacy doubtless had its share in bringing about a meeting. It took place at Vichy.<sup>37</sup> Napoleon was apparently somewhat noncommittal in respect to Slidell's demand for immediate action, but he gave Slidell to understand that his heart was in the right place. The interview lasted seventy minutes and was marked by extreme graciousness on the Emperor's part.

<sup>35</sup> July 11, 1862.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> July 16, 1862.

He talked freely, frankly and unreservedly, spoke in the most decided terms of his sympathy and his regret that England had not shared his views. He said that he had made a great mistake in respecting a blockade which had for six months at least not been effective, that we ought to have been recognized last summer while our ports were still in our own possession. He spoke freely of the Mexican question and of the probability of its soon bringing him into collision with the U. S. That the treaty with Mexico if ratified by the Senate would place them virtually in a hostile position towards him. He asked if he offered mediation how the question of boundaries could be settled. What we would insist on? I said that we would insist on all the States where a majority of the people had already determined by their votes to join our Confederacy, leaving the people of Kentucky, Missouri and Maryland to decide for themselves whether they would or would not unite their fortunes with ours. He expressed his regret that he had not been able sooner to see me and on parting said that he hoped for the future I should have less difficulty in seeing him.

On the whole he left on my mind the impression that if England long persisted in her inaction, he would be disposed to act without her, although of course he did not commit himself to do so. He said that he had reason not to be well satisfied with England, she had not appreciated as she should have done his support in the Trent affair. There is an important part of our conversation that I will give you through Mr. Mann. On the whole my interview was highly satisfactory. I have as yet made no mention of my having seen the Emperor but to his very confidential friends. I prefer that it should be known through other channels and as yet I have seen no notice of it in the papers.<sup>38</sup>

Armed with fresh confidence, after these expressions of imperial favor, Slidell soon sought a

<sup>38</sup> July 20, 1862.

fresh interview with Thouvenel, who had been kept in ignorance of the meeting at Vichy. Thouvenel discouraged any immediate demand for recognition but indicated the right procedure if Slidell was determined to act, giving him to understand that no reply could be expected until some time after he himself had returned from Germany, where he was going for a ten days' absence.<sup>39</sup>

Mason, meanwhile, was pressing similar demands upon Lord John Russell, and Slidell felt the most anxious solicitude as to their reception. "If the present moment be not opportune (to use his favorite phrase,) I can imagine no possible contingency short of recognition by Lincoln that will satisfy his Lordship."<sup>40</sup> He wished each negotiation, however, to stand upon its own merits, and urged Mason to secrecy regarding the maneuvers at Paris, which were apparently going well, for "I received yesterday a letter from Mr. Persigny who had been to Vichy since I saw the Emperor. He writes most encouragingly."<sup>41</sup> Contact with the Emperor led to overconfidence. And Slidell wrote on August 3, when suspense over Russell's decision was growing unbearable, "It seems to me impossible that Russell can be acting in concert with this government, and if he has undertaken to solve the question for England without full consultation and understanding with

<sup>39</sup> July 23, 1862.

<sup>40</sup> July 30, 1862.

<sup>41</sup> July 30, 1862.

France, I should be *very much* surprised and disappointed if the Emperor do not take the matter in hand on 'his own hook.' ”<sup>42</sup>

Again Lord John Russell refused to sanction these unofficial moves of Napoleon, giving as his reason the existence of a strong Union party at the South. Slidell's indignation at this refusal matched the seriousness of the decision. He suggested to Mason that England's failure to move was due to the fact "that they desire to see the North entirely exhausted and broken down and that they are willing in order to attain that object to suffer their own people to starve, and play the poltroon in the face of Europe."<sup>43</sup> There was still room for hope that Russell had acted without consultation, that Napoleon would resent the rebuff, and that action by France alone might be the result. If so, "Russell's prompt reply ought not to be regretted. France will for us be a safer ally than England."<sup>44</sup> That this would prove to be the case seemed undeniable to Persigny, but Slidell had begun to discount the latter's over-sanguine temperament. "He is very enthusiastic," Slidell wrote to Mason, "and I am not as confident as he appears to be."<sup>45</sup> Action at this juncture was, in Slidell's judgment in any event, made more doubtful by the movements of Garibaldi.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> August 3, 1862.

<sup>43</sup> August 6, 1862.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> August 6, 1862.

Events in Italy would require the full attention of Europe and would militate against Confederate hopes. Very curious testimony, this, to the influence of one liberal movement in aiding another oceans away!

Concern at the indifference of England, the timidity of France, and the tumult of Italy did not, however, move Slidell to hold out the olive branch to the Federal government. He tells Mason of a chance which the Duc de Morny, intimate of the Emperor, afforded him to talk to Seward, through the medium of a Frenchman known to be in communication with Washington, upon the subject of a peace by reconciliation and reconstruction. "You may be assured, in no measured terms," he writes, "of the scorn with which such a proposition would be received."<sup>47</sup>

But, if the bridge was already burned in America, in France it was desirable to keep open all avenues of communication. Chief of these was a confidential intercourse with the foreign office. Thus it was a real service which a friend at the foreign office did Slidell in giving him a chance to signify his wish for a delayed reply concerning his demand upon Thouvenel for recognition of the Confederacy. "If made it would be merely dilatory, probably more amicable in its tone than Russell's but arriving at the same conclusion."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> August 20, 1862.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*



Only the actual withdrawal of McClellan from the Peninsula would warrant Slidell in pressing Thouvenel for an immediate reply. In any event such a reply must await the Emperor's return from Chalons or Biarritz.<sup>49</sup> This in the event of good news. If the news proved bad, an immediate withdrawal from Paris might be advisable. Meanwhile, the "affairs of Italy are giving great uneasiness and with all the Emperor's desire to get rid of his English commitments, he can do nothing until Garibaldi is disposed of."<sup>50</sup>

Two weeks later affairs were in much the same state. Slidell felt that the iron was hot to strike and that failure to gain recognition in 1862 would leave "no reason to hope for any favorable action here until we shall have ceased to desire it."<sup>51</sup> But the usual alteration of mood soon came to his relief. Lee's first invasion of Maryland was raising high hopes, and Slidell allowed himself some roseate dreams of victories to come. McClellan was to attack Lee and be defeated. Philadelphia was scheduled for capture, and Washington would lie at the Confederate mercy. But, in Slidell's opinion, it would be unwise to enter the capital, for "if we do we ought to destroy the public buildings and that might produce a bad impression in Europe."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> August 20, 1862.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> September 12, 1862.

<sup>52</sup> September 26, 1862.

Contemporary with Lee's advance came the first overtures for the Confederate cotton loan. "I have been quite surprised," Slidell declares, "at an uninvited suggestion on the part of a respectable banking house of a disposition to open a credit to our government of a considerable amount. No distinct proposition as to the terms or amount, but the basis to be cotton to be delivered to the parties making the advance at certain ports in the interior."<sup>53</sup> Slidell felt disposed, in default of specific instructions, to assume responsibility for carrying through the projected loan on the basis of his general powers, subject to concurrence by Mason in the terms arranged. "Pray let me hear from you at once on the subject as I intend to see them again on Monday."<sup>54</sup> The cup of joy was pretty full. A much-needed loan was broached, and better still (September 30), it seemed once more as if recognition would not be long deferred. This from Thouvenel, the quondam skeptic. But once again a string was tied. Nothing could be done before the Emperor's return.<sup>55</sup>

On October 14, 1862, Slidell was at *qui vive*. A ministerial council at St. Cloud would decide next day the course of French policy, and recognition ought to be officially agreed upon in time for communication to England before the twenty-

<sup>53</sup> September 26, 1862.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> October 2, 1862.

third.<sup>56</sup> On the seventeenth he knew the worst. The Roman question had produced a cabinet rupture. Thouvenel resigned; Drouyn de Lhuys took his portfolio; "and for the time our question has been lost sight of."<sup>57</sup> A complete reorganization of the cabinet was averted only by the personal intervention of the Emperor. All eyes were upon Italy. The Confederacy might wait.

The political deadlock did not interfere, however, with the negotiations over the cotton loan. On October 29 Slidell took Mason more completely into his confidence on this head. He named the Erlangers as the principals, representing them as "one of the richest and most enterprising banking houses of Europe, having extensive business relations throughout Europe and free access to some very important men about the Court. They will, in anticipation of the acceptance of their propositions, actively exert themselves in our favor and enlist in the scheme persons who will be politically useful."<sup>58</sup> Slidell advised acceptance of their terms, subject to possible modifications, and completed his budget of good news with information that Napoleon was exerting himself to bring Russia as well as England into a proposal for a six months' armistice, North and South, "with our ports open to all the world,"<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> October 14, 1862.

<sup>57</sup> October 17, 1862.

<sup>58</sup> October 29, 1862.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

a project the more likely of success because of the support of King Leopold, who was believed to have much influence with his niece, Queen Victoria. "The Emperor thinks that his counsels will have great influence and perhaps Lord Palm<sup>n</sup>., when he finds the Queen with us, may be willing to act."<sup>60</sup>

Reverting to the loan, Slidell evidently feared that Mason might balk at the terms it contemplated, for he urged repeatedly that the final decision would rest not with them, but at Richmond, "while in the meanwhile the mere anticipation or hope rather of their acceptance will be useful here."<sup>61</sup>

In politics, Slidell so far misread the Russian temper as to believe that Napoleon's advances would meet a favorable response, "perhaps with some reservation."<sup>62</sup> It was unfortunate, to be sure, that Captain Maury, who had been selected for St. Petersburg, had not been appointed earlier. "We should have had an agent there long since."<sup>63</sup>

Slidell's correspondence for the year 1862 comes to an end with these reflections upon Russia,<sup>64</sup> with a belief that France was on the point of demanding a cessation of the war in the interest "of humanity not only in America but in

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> October 1, (Erroneous date for November 1) 1862.

<sup>62</sup> November 14, 1862.

<sup>63</sup> November 28, 1862.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Europe,"<sup>65</sup> and with a suggestion that army contractors and armament makers would prove useful if properly approached.<sup>66</sup> The year had been one of immense activity, anxiety, and, in view of a cause predoomed to failure, of achievement. Many wires had been pulled, many friends recruited, and much pressure brought to bear toward recognition, the great object of the mission. In a sense, Slidell's achievements in Paris were the counterpart of the military situation at home. It, too, was foredoomed to failure, but the year 1862 closed with what appeared to many minds as an even chance for victory.

Appeals for recognition and details of the cotton loan occupied Slidell in the opening days of 1863. It was reassuring to be told by Persigny that

Mr. Drouyn de L'Huys wrote to Mr. Mercier last week instructing him to make an earnest appeal for a cessation of hostilities and to suggest at all events a conference between the parties belligerent even without an armistice. Mr. Dayton was informed of the instructions and did not remonstrate against them. Mr. Drouyn is now heartily engaged in the matter and Mr. Persigny is confident that if Lincoln refuses to act on the suggestion made by him, recognition will immediately follow.<sup>67</sup>

Again the exuberance of Persigny needed to be discounted, for Slidell's next account of the instructions to Mercier admits that they were con-

<sup>65</sup> October 1, (i. e., November 1) 1862.

<sup>66</sup> December 6, 1862.

<sup>67</sup> January 21, 1863.

ciliatory to a degree, carefully avoiding "anything calculated to excite Yankee susceptibility."<sup>68</sup> But it was something to have enlisted the active coöperation of Drouyn de Lhuys. (*new for min.*)

The affair of the loan came, meanwhile, to a head, and on February 3, 1863, Slidell was able to announce its consummation, but not the particulars. Not so the arrangement for a peace conference: Slidell learned through his friend at the foreign office on February 10 that while Seward favored an armistice, Lincoln was "determined to carry on the war at all hazards,"<sup>69</sup> and Dayton, who had been passive when a conference between the belligerents was first proposed, now exerted himself in protest against French intervention.<sup>70</sup> But Slidell was hopeful that French policy would adhere to its new program and trusted to the Emperor's forthcoming speech to the Chambers to "say something significant about our affairs."<sup>71</sup> French assistance was then the chief hope, because it had soon become apparent that nothing was to be anticipated from King Leopold's influence at the British court.<sup>72</sup>

By the fifteenth Slidell was in a position to announce the terms of the cotton loan. It called for £3,000,000 in seven per cent bonds at 77 per

<sup>68</sup> January 25, 1863.

<sup>69</sup> February 11, 1863.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> February 11, 1863.

cent., "convertible into cotton at 6 d. delivered within six months after peace at a port."<sup>73</sup> This was highly satisfactory to Erlanger, though it may have seemed a hard bargain to the Confederacy.

In default of recognition, which continued to be the rainbow of illusion, Slidell reverted to the blockade issue.

I shall not make it matter of formal communication [he wrote Mason], but will endeavour to induce this government to reconsider the whole question of blockade. All here admit that a gross error has been committed in recognising the efficiency of the blockade and only desire to find some plausible pretext for retracing the false steps. The evidence of the repeated intermissions of the blockade at many points and for several days which I presented was conclusive, the voluntary relaxation of the blockade offered in my opinion much stronger grounds for declaring it inefficient than its temporary suspension from "force majeure."<sup>74</sup>

On this point, nevertheless, as on almost all others, Slidell's hopes were doomed to disappointment, for Drouyn de Lhuys informed him that France was already too far committed in recognition of the blockade for her to withdraw without the coöperation of England. "He asked me how-  
ever to write him an informal note on the subject, when he would carefully examine it."<sup>75</sup> Here, of course, was the trouble. Such examination only demonstrated the folly of action. Of the blockade

<sup>73</sup> February 15, 1863.

<sup>74</sup> February 19, 1863. See also March 1, 1863.

<sup>75</sup> February 23, 1863.



as well as of the war France continued but a passive spectator.

The only avenue for really constructive developments lay in semi-official and private negotiations with ship contractors. And 1863, in France as in England, was a year of activity in this direction. The cotton loan made ship-building possible, and Slidell soon turned his attention to this auxiliary development of his mission. "We can not only build ships here but arm and equip them. I am only waiting to know with tolerable certainty the success of the loan to suggest to Capt'n. Maury the expediency of coming over here, where I have no doubt he can build on as good terms as in England, but will have no difficulty in carrying his ship to sea."<sup>76</sup>

In the more diplomatic sphere of Slidell's mission, one excuse after another arose for French delay. In 1862 it was Garibaldi and Italy. In 1863 the troubles in Poland occupied the stage, and Slidell, in a refrain grown almost habitual, observes that "Until the Polish imbroglio is settled I do not hope that anything will be done here in our affairs."<sup>77</sup> The world of European politics thus complicated a task already diversified enough. Recognition, intervention, recall of the blockade, ship-building, and the cotton loan made in themselves a fairly formidable program for

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> March 15, 1863.

an agent not officially recognized. And already, in April, 1863, the problem of Confederate credit had arisen. The bonds, now on the market, had declined three or four points;<sup>78</sup> Spence, the English agent, feared a drop of fifteen; and stock-exchange operations to bolster the bonds were already a subject of discussion. Slidell displayed on this economic subject, as well as upon the more strictly diplomatic questions in his purview, a strong acumen.

I do not see at present [he declares] any sufficient motive for buying on acct. of our government, but the time may arrive before the settling day when it may be a good policy to do so. In the meanwhile, I think it would be well to agree that the amount of the loan should be reduced to two millions with the privilege however of taking the other million within some fixed delay. This would leave very little floating scrip for the operators for a fall to work on.<sup>79</sup>

Along with these sound ideas on conservative policy, are revealed some details of the loan which betray their writer's familiarity with high finance. He mentions that, if the sales go badly, the Erangers have the option of withdrawing from the entire transaction by a payment to the Confederacy of £300,000 but says, "I have no idea that under any circumstances they will take this ground, for they would be very heavy losers,

<sup>78</sup> April 5, 1863.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

having, as they inform me, expended large sums in conciliating certain interests and influences.”<sup>80</sup>

Mason’s arrangements for price-bolstering were successful for the time being, and on the thirteenth Slidell anticipated an early premium of five or six per cent.<sup>81</sup> His own affair of the ship-building also gave favorable prospect of success, involving as it did the following: “B[ulloch] is about making contract to be binding only when I shall have recd. assurance from the highest source that he can use the articles when ready.”<sup>82</sup>

Slidell, in turn, made himself useful to Napoleon by providing him with evidence of Yankee shipments of arms to the Mexican government. This, he told Mason, he had secured through “the recklessness or stupidity of Mr. Charles Francis Adams.”<sup>83</sup> The influence of these disclosures was not confined to Napoleon, for Slidell noted with satisfaction a new truculence in John Bull.<sup>84</sup> The time was, nevertheless, ill chosen, in Slidell’s opinion, to press Great Britain for direct permission to export arms. He preferred to work through a neutral agency, and on April 27 made the following report to Mason:

I am now in treaty with the agent of a foreign government for an arrangement that will enable our ships to

<sup>80</sup> April 5, 1863.

<sup>81</sup> April 13, 1863.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> April 22, 1863.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

leave England armed and equipped without any danger of interruption. Capt'n. Bullock goes over to-morrow, and he will give you full details. I am sure that you will consider the proposed arrangement as in every way desirable.<sup>85</sup>

Quite impossible achievements were anticipated of this new British-Confederate navy. Slidell even predicted that if the ships once got to sea, "we can open the Mississippi and retake New Orleans."<sup>86</sup>

In May, 1863, interest shifted from blockade-runners and Confederate cruisers back to the loan. Spence, the British agent for its flotation, was pessimistic, and rumors, which Slidell believed to be without foundation, concerning negotiations for a second loan were injuring the confidence of "the City" in the first loan. On his own responsibility, Slidell denied that such a loan was in contemplation, but he had an uneasy suspicion that after all it might be. His anxiety was increased by an entire lack of confidence in Spence. "I am obliged to confess that I have no faith in Mr. S.'s judgment or business qualities, and am almost equally sceptical about his fair dealing or disinterestedness."<sup>87</sup>

From Spence himself, who claimed to have specific authorization from the Confederate treasury for the negotiation of this new loan, Slidell de-

<sup>85</sup> April 27, 1863.

<sup>86</sup> May 6, 1863.

<sup>87</sup> May 8, 1863.

manded to see the instructions.<sup>88</sup> The reply was evasive. Spence spoke of rumor only, mentioned Oppenheim and Co. as the probable bankers, indicated \$100,000,000 in six per cent. bonds as the proposed sum, recounted his own efforts in the *Times* to bolster confidence in the cotton loan, admitted that this would be fatally jeopardized by such an issue as they were discussing, and concluded evasively without any reference to the supposed instructions, that "it is now better to wrap this matter entirely in oblivion for the present," taking especial care to keep it a secret from Erlanger and Co., who might, in an effort to extricate themselves from the cotton loan, only embarrass it further.<sup>89</sup> This reply was far from satisfactory to Slidell. He not only noted its spirit of evasion, but objected to its assumption of authority in the expenditure as well as in the flotation of the loan. To Mason he wrote that "Spence appears to consider that the powers of Secy. of Navy as well as of Treasury are vested in him. I am getting heartily tired of his meddling."<sup>90</sup>

The consolation of Slidell's mission was that, although something or other was going wrong nearly all the time, not everything did so at once. In the same month of his anxiety over Spence and the loans, developments in Mexico freed Napoleon's hands and augured well for a policy of

<sup>88</sup> May 10, 1863.

<sup>89</sup> Spence to Slidell, May 11, 1863.

<sup>90</sup> May 15, 1863.

intervention. "I am to have an audience with the Emperor on Friday," wrote Slidell, "from which I hope good results, as the recent successes in Mexico leave him freer to act than he was before. In the meanwhile [and here Slidell shows an attention to preparation and detail which marks the conscientious diplomat] pray endeavour to ascertain what will be the probable result of Mr. Roebuck's motion on the thirtieth and let me know. The motion will in all probability be alluded to by the Emperor."<sup>91</sup> But the interview came and passed, with intervention still a dream of the future, and Slidell thought it best to await the outcome of the French elections before making his next move.<sup>92</sup>

In June, 1863, while Lee was gathering his army for the push towards Gettysburg, Slidell was quietly working on the shipping problem. He favored selling a certain vessel to Russia, in order to be in funds for the building of two others of a more suitable type, and he declared mysteriously that "Another advantage would result from the sale to Russia. It would give increased facilities to another operation you wot of."<sup>93</sup>

In the more conventional field of his negotiations he faced the old issue of procrastination. Napoleon's attitude of friendliness toward the Confederacy remained unchanged, but so did his

<sup>91</sup> Another letter of the same date (May 15, 1863).

<sup>92</sup> May 23, 1863.

<sup>93</sup> June 26, 1863.

disposition not to act without England. With a view to securing this coöperation, however, he had once more, June 22, sounded Palmerston, the Emperor himself writing a note to his minister at London, Baron Gros, in which he used the words, "je me demande s'il ne serait bien d'arrestar Lord Palmerston que je suis décidé à reconnaître le Sud."<sup>94</sup> Slidell learned this through his confidential friend at the foreign office, and he allowed himself an exultation keener than any he had known since first he learned of Napoleon's friendly sentiments, keener, it may be added, than his previous disappointments should have countenanced. In his exuberance he wrote to Mason that,

This is by far the most significant thing the Emperor has said either to me or to others—it renders me comparatively indifferent what England may do or omit doing.

At all events, let Mr. Roebuck press his motion and make his statement of the Emperor's declarations. Lord Palmerston will not dare to dispute [and] the responsibility of the continuance of the war will rest entirely with him.<sup>95</sup>

Again everything led only to disappointment. Mr. Roebuck presented a motion which indicated no cognizance of the Emperor's intentions. But Slidell was disposed to acquit the Emperor of any blame. "I am satisfied," he wrote Mason, "that he has kept his promise with good faith. Either

<sup>94</sup> June 29, 1863.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*



the Minister of Foreign Affairs or Baron Gros or both have failed to carry out his instructions or Messrs. Russell and Layard have asserted what was false. *Perhaps* Lord Palmerston may have recd. the communication and failed to inform their [sic] colleagues of the fact. I hope that this may prove to be the fact."<sup>96</sup>

Gettysburg, and the prospect of French intervention failed together. The high-water mark, both on the battlefield and in the field of diplomacy, had been reached. From that time on the history of the Confederacy was that of a decline and fall. Nor was it otherwise with the Slidell mission. Occasional gleams of hope illumined the monotony of disappointment. But the realist could see only final despair. The true barometer of foreign aspirations lay in England. By September Slidell was as gloomy over the luke-warm aid of friends as over the avowed antagonism of enemies. "Sir James Ferguson and Mr. Gregory in the debate on Roebuck's motion seemed to be as indisposed to recognize us as Russell and Bright. They give us fair words it is true, but beyond these we have nothing to expect of them."<sup>97</sup>

For such satisfaction as was to be gleaned, one was obliged to turn to social rather than to diplomatic life. In the *beau monde* the Slidells were

<sup>96</sup> July 9, 1863.

<sup>97</sup> September 16, 1863.

conspicuous.<sup>97</sup> Slidell pictures their life at Paris with a justifiable pride at the position of his wife and family.

My family and I have been twice to the receptions of the Empress. She received Mrs. S. and the girls most graciously. At these parties men are not presented to her but at her request. On both occasions she sent for me. on the first she talked with me for more than 20 minutes. She is perfectly well posted about our affairs, and understands the question in all its bearings thoroughly. At my second visit she conversed probably 10 or 12 minutes and was very particular in inquiring about the siege of Charleston.

She sympathises most warmly with our cause and so expresses herself without any reserve. I mention these facts because the Empress is supposed, I believe with truth, to exercise considerable influence in public affairs. . . . I forgot to mention that the Emperor at the second reception of the Empress was present—he came to me and shook hands and conversed very cordially for several minutes.<sup>98</sup>

The correspondence with Mason apparently ceased in September, 1863, for the remainder of the year, so that Slidell's views upon the course of affairs in the autumn and winter are not available from this source. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that the round of diplomatic calls continued to be engrossing, nerve-destroying, and fruitless, while in the world of society, the fasci-

<sup>97a</sup> Long afterwards the Comtesse de St. Roman in describing the gaieties of these days writes, "How often did we hunt together both stags and wild boars with the packs of the Duc d' Aumale and Prince de Joinville and the Marquis de Lubersac." To the author, August 10, 1922.

<sup>98</sup> Biarritz, September 16, 1863.

nation of Paris brought the Slidells more and more under its spell. Certainly the busy record of the first two years leads one to believe that Slidell continued at his task, indefatigable and urbane, ready for every opportunity to advance the cause nearest his heart.

Communication, at any rate as far as the files are now preserved, was renewed in March, 1864. Slidell discusses with Mason some details of the naval war,<sup>99</sup> puts him on his guard against Fortunatus Crosby, formerly a consul at Geneva, now posing as a friend of the South, but more probably an emissary in the pay of Seward,<sup>100</sup> and denies the rumor that French intervention is imminent. He reports a very friendly interview with M. Drouyn de Lhuys in which the latter expressed his southern sympathies with more than usual warmth, and intimated that Lord Palmerston also was full of admiration for the Confederacy and confident of its ability to maintain itself, information to this effect having come to the foreign office through a Frenchman high in the confidence of the Emperor, who had been honored with a recent interview with the British premier.<sup>101</sup> Drouyn apparently did not feel entire confidence in the correctness of these statements, inasmuch as he urged Slidell himself to ascertain Lord

<sup>99</sup> March 6, 1864.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> March 9, 1864.

Palmerston's intentions, a not very easy task, to be sure, but one which Slidell attempted to carry out through the assistance of Colonel Mann, in the supposed absence of Mason from London.<sup>102</sup>

Judging, however, from the course which the government actually pursued, the real views of M. Drouyn de Lhuys were far removed from those which he expressed to Slidell. To one of his colleagues he declared that the supposed renewal of negotiations between France and England tending toward a recognition of the Confederacy was "absolutely without foundation."<sup>103</sup> It was true that France and possibly Lord Palmerston also took a friendly attitude toward the Confederacy, but the time to manifest this was by no means opportune, more especially as Napoleon was as determined as ever not to act alone.<sup>104</sup>

Contradictions like these of Drouyn de Lhuys were becoming familiar to Slidell, but in the present instance there was the added chagrin of the failure to secure a promised interview with the Archduke Maximilian, who was on the point of leaving for Mexico. Slidell's comment on this is bitter.

I have reason to believe that in declining to see me, he followed the advice of the Emperor influenced by Mercier saying that Lincoln had assured him that the Imperial government in Mexico would be recognized at Washington

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> March 13, 1864.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

provided no negotiations were entered into with the Confederacy.

All this is very disgusting and I find it very difficult to keep my temper amidst all this double dealing. . . . This is a rascally world and it is most hard to say who can be trusted.<sup>105</sup>

Pious lamentations upon the world's duplicity did not prevent Slidell from contributing his mite toward the sum total thereof. Unable to see Maximilian directly, he worked upon the sympathies of General Wold, his aide-de-camp, and the only Frenchman in his suite, therefore the most likely of all to present the Confederate cause in a favorable light to the Emperor. "I have talked to him very freely," writes Slidell, "as to the consequences that will result from a refusal to be on good terms with the Confederacy. He agrees with me fully and will have ample opportunity of impressing his views on the Archduke during the passage to Vera Cruz."<sup>106</sup>

These subterranean methods made the £500 received in June, 1864, for secret-service account a welcome addition to the £1500 allowance for a contingent fund.<sup>107</sup> Perhaps it oiled an occasional cog at the foreign office and procured for Slidell such gossip as "that the British Government has made definite overtures of energetic measures to curb the German governments and that they are

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> March 22, 1864.

<sup>107</sup> June 9, 1864.

favorably listened to here—my informant would not be surprised at a general European war this summer. he is very reliable. I give you this for what it is worth.”<sup>108</sup>

The war had now dragged on into mid-1864. Its outcome was more and more dubious. The advantages which an early recognition by Europe might have won for the Confederacy were already forfeited. In Slidell’s words,

The time has now arrived when it is comparatively of very little importance what Queen or Emperor may say or think about us. A plague I say on both your houses. I have an autograph letter of the Emperor to a friend, saying that he *had* given an *order* to let the *Rappahannock* go to sea. the letter is dated 7 inst. and yet the permission is still withheld by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>109</sup>

In default of material aid from France and Great Britain, Slidell was skeptical of the advantages to be derived from the moral aid of the Papacy. Thus, in December, 1864, when Sherman was well on his way to the sea, Slidell opposed the publication of a letter from Cardinal Antonelli, the papal secretary of state,

as it was much less decided in its tone than the Pope’s letter to the President of Decr. 63. . . . Mr. Mann does not agree with me in opinion. he thinks the publication of Antonelli’s note desirable. I am never very tenacious of my opinion unless in matters of very grave importance and this is not of that category.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> July 17, 1864.

Pray let me know what you think. if you agree with me I will write to Mann that I do not object to publishing the letter in Belgium but that I would rather that it should not appear in the London or the Paris papers.<sup>110</sup>

Mason sided with Mann, and Slidell yielded to their judgment.

In Slidell's mission, as in the affairs of the Confederacy at home, 1864 was a year of reverses. Less is heard of even the possibility of intervention. A possible break-up of the blockade is not once mentioned. Comments upon naval construction and the interpretation of the law of prizes<sup>111</sup> are pessimistic. Even in Mexico, where a ray of hope might be said to gleam, failure to establish a direct contact with Maximilian was disappointing. Such a weight of despair the polite nothings of Drouyn de Lhuys, the imaginary favor of Palmerston, and the conventional benedictions of Antonelli were by no means adequate to counterbalance. The hopes of the Confederacy were sinking.

Early in the new year came rumors of peace, which at first appeared incredible to Slidell.

I am completely bewildered about the peace rumors<sup>112</sup> [he wrote]. I attached no importance to them until the news of Blair's return to Richmond. This indeed looks as if some serious negotiation were on foot, and yet I cannot conceive on what it can be based. From what point

<sup>110</sup> December 16, 1864.

<sup>111</sup> See a letter of December 18, 1864.

<sup>112</sup> February 3, 1865.



of departure can it commence? Our affairs have never appeared to be in a worse condition and it is difficult to imagine that Lincoln would now entertain the idea of separation which he has so long and so studiously rejected.

On the other hand, I cannot permit myself for a moment to suppose that President Davis would listen to any terms of which independence was not the indispensable preliminary condition. I have endeavored to get some information here but without success. are you better posted than I? I have not written you for a long while, but I have had nothing to communicate and there has been little in the news from home to invite comment.<sup>113</sup>

But, until peace became an actuality, Slidell's mission went on in its accustomed rut. Lord John Russell continued to be the *bête noir*;<sup>114</sup> Mason continued to receive advice on the proper approaches to Lord Palmerston in the light of developments at Paris;<sup>115</sup> and agreeable but fruitless sessions with the Emperor, his cabinet, and intimate friends, continued to absorb the time of Slidell.<sup>116</sup> An interview with Napoleon on March 5, 1865, brought him no nearer the goal than their first colloquy at Vichy in 1862. "My interview with the Emperor resulted as I supposed it would. He is willing and anxious to act with England but will not move without her."<sup>117</sup> And England had rejected his overtures too often to warrant the

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> February 14, 1865.

<sup>115</sup> March 5, 1865.

<sup>116</sup> March 5, 6, 1865.

<sup>117</sup> March 6, 1865.

expectation that she would ever heed them. In fact, in the judgment of Napoleon, it was useless for Mason to press the issue further, until Beauregard should prove his ability to stop the northward progress of Sherman's army. This notwithstanding the fact that in other matters England was manifesting a disposition increasingly conciliatory toward Napoleon.<sup>118</sup>

Mason, it appears, had doubted the fact of the overtures to which Napoleon alluded, for Slidell took occasion to remind him of Lord Palmerston's "implicit admission" to that effect.<sup>119</sup> It was in their last interchange of letters before Appomattox. A curious blindness to events and their significance obscured from Mason even the finality involved in Lee's surrender. He continued to hope against hope. The more practical mind of Slidell grasped the issue in its fullest bearings. His letter to Mason on April 26, 1865, is the swan-song of their mission.<sup>120</sup>

My dear Sir.

I cannot share your hopefulness. we have seen the beginning of the end. I for my part am prepared for the worst. With Lee's surrender there will soon be an end of our regularly organised armies and I can see no possible good to come from a protracted guerilla warfare. We are crushed and must submit to the yoke. our children must bide their time for vengeance, but you and I

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> March 22, 1865.

<sup>120</sup> April 26, 1865.

will never revisit our homes under our glorious flag. For myself I shall never put my foot on a soil over which flaunts the hated stars and stripes.

I went yesterday to the Foreign Affairs but Mr. C. had already left his office. I have sent Eustis [his secretary of legation] to make the inquiries you desired and shall keep my letter open to give you the result—but before you receive this you will probably have another steamers news with Lincoln's program of pacification and reconstruction. I am sick, sick at heart.

Yours faithfully,  
John Slidell.

Slidell's comments upon the assassination of Lincoln are not preserved in the files of his correspondence with Mason. But, in the accession of Andrew Johnson, he foresaw mischief. To Mason's suggestion that there were elements in the situation promising a new lease of life for the Confederacy, Slidell replied without enthusiasm. "I confess I can see no grounds for the hopes you entertain unless some drunken outbreak of Andy Johnson should induce Grant to take possession of the government and thus produce a civil war in the North. A few months, however, perhaps a few weeks, will decide which of us is right."<sup>121</sup>

The personal fortunes of Slidell declined with the cause for which he labored. The capture of New Orleans, followed by the confiscation of his property by the Union authorities, cut off his chief source of private income. He was obliged at that time to discontinue an annuity of \$600 previously

<sup>121</sup> May 1, 1865.

paid to a maiden sister and, for his own wants, to depend upon his salary as a commissioner. With the war at an end, this also terminated, though all arrears in salary were made good to him and Mason from a small unexpended balance of Confederate funds still in the hands of Fraser, Trenholm and Co., fiscal agents for the defunct government. Slidell, accordingly, gave up his expensive apartment and economized in various other ways. "I little thought," he wrote Mason, "when we left the Confederacy that the time could arrive when I should be compelled to make these calculations, but so it is and I trust that I bear the change with a considerable degree of philosophy."<sup>122</sup> That he was in some straits is clear enough from his decision to sell his library.<sup>123</sup> Yet his desire to realize upon all available assets proceeded not so much from immediate want as from a conviction that no more funds would ever be forthcoming from America. "We [Mr. Mason and I] are peculiarly situated," he reminded an English correspondent, "as we can have no expectation of ever returning to our homes or recovering any of our property (our children may some day or other save something from the general wreck), for even if we were disposed to apply for grace, I cannot stomach the word pardon, no amnesty would be extended to us, certainly neither

<sup>122</sup> May 29, 1865.

<sup>123</sup> July 26, 1865.

to Mr. Mason nor to me. Mr. Mann might possibly have some chance of being forgiven, but I have no idea he will make the experiment."<sup>124</sup>

It is not likely that, in the wreck of hopes so many and so great, Slidell felt much anxiety over pecuniary embarrassments present or threatening. Life, which had begun so auspiciously and had continued by emptying upon him her horn of plenty, was falling into the sere and yellow leaf, his glory and his hope alike departed, and bitterness his destined portion. The maker of Presidents was an exile; the cause he had aided a ruin. Whatever his few years remaining might behold must be the anti-climax of tragedy.

<sup>124</sup> July 26, 1865.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION AND RETROSPECTION

THERE can be no doubt of Slidell's sincerity in desiring never again to set foot on American soil, but the interests of his children in the confiscated estates, which he had meanwhile deeded to them, caused him to humble his pride to the extent of applying to President Johnson in August, 1866, for permission to visit New Orleans. The communication was forwarded through the courtesy of John Bigelow, who had been Union chargé d' affaires at Paris throughout the war. Slidell was mindful of the dignity of the cause which he had represented, but, with his usual perception of facts, he did not disguise that he must now be the suppliant. The letter is notable.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. President.

I have for the last year been desirous to return, at least for a limited period, to the State of Louisiana, but have deferred asking permission to do so, believing that the policy which you intended to pursue towards persons situated as I am, had not been decided on by you, or if decided, that the time had not arrived for promulgating it. The condition of the world would now seem to authorize

<sup>1</sup> August 6, 1866. Quoted in a letter to Mason, October 7, 1866.

the hope that the day is not distant when that reserve will no longer be considered necessary.

My antecedents are known to you, and it would be worse than useless [to] trespass on your valuable time to recur more particularly to them. It may not however be improper for me to say, that since the month of May '65, I have without intruding my counsels on any one, invariably advised such *ci-devant* Confederates returning to their former homes as have thought fit to ask my opinion, to accept frankly the issue of the past struggle with all its legitimate consequences, the first of which I consider to be an unreserved submission to the authority of the government of the United States. With this brief explanation, I solicit permission to visit the State of Louisiana and respectfully ask to be informed on what conditions, if on any, I may be allowed to do so.

I have the honor to be with great respect

Your Mt. Obedt. Sr.

John Slidell.

To the President of the United States,  
Washington.

I have thought it proper to send this letter unsealed through the Legation of the United States at Paris.

Four months having passed without reply, Slidell concluded that none was intended. He wrote an account of the whole episode to Mason, emphasizing that the proposed visit was solely in his children's interest, and reiterating his determination not to apply for a special pardon, though admitting his willingness to take advantage of any general pardon which might cover his case without the imposition of humiliating conditions.

For instance [he declared], I would not object to pledge myself to do no act hostile to the government of the U. S.



for without any such pledge, I should discourage any attempt for a renewed movement, satisfied that our people have been too dreadfully crippled to make one successfully for many years. Nothing would induce me ever to become a citizen of the U. S. nor will any of my children, I trust, ever establish themselves there. Indeed could I return tomorrow to Louisiana, be elected by acclamation to the Senate and received without contradiction at Washington, I would shrink with disgust from any association with those who now pollute the Capitol.

One word of explanation—my declaration about advice given to Confederates returning to their homes is strictly correct, but I have never advised any so to return, who were not absolutely without means to reside abroad or the necessary qualities and connections to enable them to support themselves decently elsewhere, nor had leave been given to me to visit Louisiana would I have accepted it coupled with any other condition than a parole of honor to do nothing hostile to the government.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, when Mason found in 1869 that he was one of those who would be better off at home in Virginia, Slidell approved the move and admitted that in similar circumstances he would have done the same.<sup>3</sup>

But having one daughter married in France and Mrs. Slidell with the two others having become not only accustomed to but satisfied with Parisian life—having no interest which could be advanced by my presence in America—feeling that I could not possibly render any service to any one or any cause at home, I have made up my mind to let the remainder of my days, in the course of nature it cannot be a long one, glide away quietly in Paris. There is no great hardship in this, for there is no spot on earth where the “*dolce far niente*” can be more fully enjoyed.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> October 7, 1866.

<sup>3</sup> November 3, 1869.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

That Slidell, in spite of financial reverses, more anticipated, perhaps, than they were real, was in position to enjoy the more refined delights of Paris is attested by his daughter. In writing of post-bellum days the Comtesse de St. Roman declares that her father was under no necessity to practice law, notwithstanding "the illegal sale of his property in Louisiana by the rascal, General Butler."<sup>5</sup> Nor was he under the compulsion of burdening his friends. " 'La vie chere', which is such a plague in France victorious but temporarily ruined, did not exist then, was not dreamed of, and the incomes of the sums he had brought to Paris at different periods and invested with wisdom, were sufficient to secure 'un train de vie' which I may describe as more than comfortable, 'fait avec élégance'."<sup>6</sup>

Social relations were maintained with those agreeable circles among which the Slidells had always moved. No irritation which Slidell had felt at British policy toward the Confederacy prevented, for example, renewal of friendly intercourse with Lord Lyons on his transfer to Paris. As the daughter of Slidell expresses it, "We were, after Washington, again at Paris in the most intimate contact with all the English embassy. Lord

<sup>5</sup> The Comtesse de St. Roman does not forget that her mother's sister, Caroline Deslonde, wife of Gen. Gustave Tontan de Beauregard, died of horror of the entrance of Gen. Butler into New Orleans. To the author, August 31, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> Mme. la Comtesse de St. Roman to the author, Aug. 31, 1922.

Lyons was an intimate and charming friend in Washington; he remained so in Paris.”<sup>7</sup>

One is tempted to compare the post-bellum career of Slidell with that of Benjamin. But to do so is not quite fair. Benjamin was a younger man returning to his native country. And while it is a marvel of the law that he was able to rise to such distinction at the English bar, time and circumstance were alike more favorable to him than to the older man, whose race was already so nearly run.

Notwithstanding his own contentment with this luxurious retirement, Slidell approved the decision of his son Alfred to enter the bond business in New York and to acquire residence and citizenship as a step toward the prolonged litigation which would be involved in a recovery of the confiscated property in Louisiana. Thus reconstruction was weaving even so torn and shattered a thread as the Slidells into the woof of a new nation, and the mission of the emissary of Confederacy and disunion had come to its philosophical as well as its technical end.

Some allusions to Slidell in this twilight of his days occur in letters from Judah P. Benjamin to Senator Mason, who, as the author well knew, was certain to feel an interest in any mention of his erstwhile colleague. Thus, in October, 1866, at the conclusion of a lengthy epistle, Benjamin

<sup>7</sup> Same to same. Easter Day, 1925.

mentions that "I saw Slidell in Paris, looking well and he inquired warmly after you." The following May, 1867, Benjamin declares that "Slidell is the same as ever. I see no change in him." A third and final reference narrates sympathetically the circumstances of Mrs. Slidell's death.

Slidell is in London, and I see him as often as one well can in this great City where distances are so formidable, and the habits of society so much opposed to any facility for evening social intercourse, unless preceded by a formal dinner party. His family were all at Brighton, when Mrs. Slidell who was apparently in perfect health (an hour after having left her daughters in good and cheerful spirits in the drawing room) [was found] lying senseless on the floor of her bedroom, and she never recovered consciousness. She died in two or three hours afterwards, and I am not sure whether the attack was apoplectic or from disease of the heart, but I think the former.<sup>8</sup>

The death of Mrs. Slidell on English soil was release from a second exile. Even as the Civil War had transferred the family to France, so the Franco-Prussian War compelled a further move. The Slidells were at Deauville when the Second Empire crashed. Their grief for Napoleon's misfortunes was altogether genuine. Slidell felt for Napoleon and Eugénie a bond of sympathy all the stronger because of the imperial solicitude for his own misfortunes. As the Comtesse de St. Roman remarks, "The Emperor had overwhelmed us with

<sup>8</sup> Correspondence between Judah P. Benjamin and James M. Mason. Typed copy in the Library of Congress.

attentions as well as the beautiful Empress Eugénie." She accompanied her father on an immediate visit to the imperial couple in their exile.<sup>9</sup>

The opinions of Slidell upon politics both American and French in the era of reconstruction for the one, of catastrophe approaching for the other, can be gleaned but partially. Speaking first of his American observations, it appears from the recollections of the Comtesse de St. Roman that though her father did not pass active censure on the military policy of the Confederacy, "I am convinced that in his heart he suffered deeply." Replying to the question, "Did he ever come to feel that it was for the best that the United States remained a single nation?" his daughter affirms that "on this point he never spoke as much as a single word." Of Lincoln and his death, he avoided making any mention. He came to think once more with kindness of Stephen A. Douglas. August Belmont he never met again, but the ladies of the Belmont family were most affectionately welcomed during their long and frequent stays in Paris.

Toward French politics, Slidell's attitude can be gleaned in part from his daughter's reply to the question "What was his opinion as to the character and ability of Napoleon III?" and "Did he blame him for the commencement and the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War?" She writes as

<sup>9</sup> Mme. la Comtesse de St. Roman to the author, March 27, 1925.

follows: "He had for him [Napoleon] a deeply sincere attachment and therefore all the more regret for his trials but was there not in these *two men the same pang?*" With personal approval so unqualified, there is scant likelihood, one may suppose, that Slidell perceived the disastrous tendencies in Napoleon's foreign policies.

But Slidell's observations on the passing scene, however shrewd, however tinged with sadness, were drawing toward their close. To one who had endured so much of disappointment, the loss of his companion in happiness and in sorrow was a blow from which recovery was impossible. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mrs. Slidell, by only a few months, preceded her husband in death. Through the kindness of their daughter, I am enabled to include a letter, one of the last he ever wrote, from Slidell to his brother-in-law, Rear Admiral Raymond Rogers, husband of Slidell's youngest sister, Julia. Admiral Rogers was commander of the United States fleet in the Mediterranean.

London 29 Belgrave Square  
Xmas Day 1870.

My dear Raymond

Many thanks for your kind letter. As this may not find you at Darmstadt, I put it under cover to Julia.

I have full faith in your expression of sympathy and regrets for the departed, for those who best knew her most admired and loved her. I have great consolation in the consciousness that in our married life of thirty-five



years there had been no cloud between us: had there been, it must have been my fault, for in all her relations, domestic and social, it would have been difficult to find any human being nearer perfection. I feel that for my children it would have been in every way better that I should have been the first called: to us all the loss is irreparable.

Our grief is much soothed by the reflection that she passed without any physical pain. Julia may perhaps have heard me express a wish that when my time should come, I might be spared the sufferings of a protracted illness; the sudden death which our liturgy deprecates has never had any terrors for me, to be stricken down with intellect unimpaired and without bodily pain has always been a consummation to be wished.

I have frequently said so, surrounded by those who were dear to me, but could never find an assenting voice. Now, I believe all share my opinion.

We are all much gratified at your approaching visit.

We see no strangers, but you will always be welcome.

This day, festive to so many, is a dreary one to us. The weather too is in accordance with our feelings: the fog is so dense that, writing at midday, I can scarcely dispense with a lamp.

With best love to Julia and the children, believe me, my dear Raymond,

Yours faithfully,  
John Slidell.

Writing after the death of Slidell at Cowes in 1871, Barlow, an erstwhile associate in the great days of 1856, pays a tribute fully justified by the life of his subject. "His pure personal character, his indomitable and coercive will, his undoubted courage, and his cool and deliberate good sense gave him a high place among the advisers of the Confederate cause."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> G. T. Curtis, *Buchanan*, II, 173.



The present study of Slidell can not pretend to have altered his place in history. His fame as the indefatigable commissioner of the Confederacy was already secure. The importance, also, of his mission to Mexico was recognized, and he was known as one of perhaps a dozen leaders in the ante-bellum South whose decision for or against the Union would prove decisive. It is possible that Slidell's connection with Buchanan and the large share which he had personally in the election of 1856 and in the subsequent policies of Buchanan are here revealed more fully than before. But the justification for a somewhat fuller treatment of Slidell than has previously appeared lies less in the novelty of the material than in the importance of the man. Slidell possessed many elements of greatness, and he lived in the midst of great events. The history of the Old South demands at least this slight recognition of one of her most striking personalities.

It is not for the biographer to praise or to condemn, but the present writer cannot conclude his labors without tribute to the human qualities of the subject. Slidell was slow in attaining that greatness which finally marked him for her own. Similarly, I believe, his political methods enlarged with the growing field for their employment. The qualities of a local boss, to which Jackson took exception, are not the qualities of a United States senator striving to protect the citizens of Wash-

ington from exploitation at the hands of traction magnates. Coldness toward the bleeding Sumner is forgotten in the courage which turned its back upon the labors of a life-time lost and faced the future with tranquility. And, all the while, whether in the heat of political passion or the calm of retrospection, Slidell embodied one great virtue which Americans admire; the beauty and charm of his home life are beyond cavil.

Altogether, in the fulness of reconstruction, it is fair to include Slidell in the calendar of distinguished Americans. Destiny called him to serve a section rather than a nation at a time when the whole had lost all meaning to some of its parts. Yet time with its healing touch has removed most of the agony of the period, leaving the outstanding figures of an heroic age to claim the homage of their countrymen, North and South. Among these, Slidell, always at his post of duty, moving heaven and earth to win friends for his cause, resolute to the end and undaunted by its consequences, merits a place as one of the great Americans who, like Franklin, have pleaded an American issue before the bar of world opinion.



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## INDEX

- Adams, Charles Francis, uncomplimentary estimate, 212.
- Adams, John Quincy, converted to Republicanism, 7; comment on Slidell's Jackson speech, 26; comment on eulogy of Bossier (foot-note), 30; comment on tariff speech by Slidell (foot-note), 37; opposes Texan annexation, 49.
- Appleton, William, courteous to Slidell, a captive, 183.
- Appropriations, New Orleans Custom House, 44; recommendations for the same, 154.
- Atocha, Colonel Alexander J., go-between for Polk and Santa Anna, 68-69.
- Bancroft, George, severe on Slidell's anti-Union ideas (foot-note), 136.
- Barlow, S. M., aids Buchanan's nomination, 1856, 122, 123; tribute to the character of Slidell, 237.
- Baroche, M., President of the Council of State in France, 187.
- Barrow, Senator Alexander, denounces Plaquemine frauds, 39; Senate seat vacant, 77; death, 102.
- Bassett, Professor John Spencer, author's acknowledgment of indebtedness for letters (foot-note), 13.
- Bell, John, favors general river and harbor policy, 105; Presidential candidate, 171; loses Louisiana by 3,000, 174.
- Belmont, August, marries Caroline Perry, 6; sponsors newspaper for Buchanan, 87; informs Slidell of Buchanan-Marcy interview, 88; wishes Slidell at Baltimore, 1852, 91; annoyed at Buchanan's defeat, 1852, 94; seeks a diplomatic post, 96; connections at Madrid, 108; has European backing of the Rothschilds, 111; quits Buchanan for Douglas, 159; never saw Slidell after Civil War, 235.
- Benjamin, Judah P., of Jewish origin, 6; on bill to remove obstructions to the Mississippi, 105; influential at Cincinnati, 1856, 122; recommended for a cabinet position, 140; recommended for mission to Madrid, 152; accused of pandering to Wall Street, 155; defends Slidell on "Houmas" swindling charge, 157; accused of sharp practice (foot-note), 165; hearty support in "Houmas" case, 167; successful at the English bar, 233; mentions Slidell in letters to Mason, 233-234; describes death of Mrs. Slidell, 234.
- Benton, Col. Thomas Hart, displeased with result of Slidell's mission to Mexico, 71; opposes Slidell for Senate,

- 78; not trusted by Buchanan's friends, 132.
- Bigelow, John, chargé d' affaires at Paris, 229.
- Billault, M., government speaker in Chamber of Deputies, 189; hopeful message to Slidell, 193; denies imminence of recognition, 196.
- Blockade, deeply resented in France, 209.
- Bossier, Hon. P. E., eulogy by Slidell, 29-30; its sentiments forgotten, 42.
- Brainard, Dr. Daniel, Chicago surgeon, 149; spreads anti-Douglas canard, 150; veracity is compromised, 151.
- Breckinridge, John C., Vice-Presidential nominee, 1856, 124; Slidell's choice for President, 1860, 171; sure to carry South, 172.
- Bright, Senator Jesse D., of Indiana, returns to Senate, 139; opposed by Douglas, 140.
- Bright, John, opposed to Southern recognition, 217.
- Buchanna, James, first letter in Slidell correspondence, 37-38; approves Slidell's course in Mexico, 64; not unfriendly to Mexico, 67; cordial on mission's termination, 76-77; advised against Governorship of Pennsylvania, 80-81; sure to be a candidate in 1852, 82; more available than Cass, 84; Slidell's choice for President, 89; preferred to Cass by Douglas men, 91; preferred to Douglas by Cass men, 91; reputed views on admission of Missouri, 92; reflections on Baltimore Convention, 1852, 94; supports Belmont for diplomatic post, 96; minister at Court of St. James, 100; diplomatic costume, 106; not responsible for fiasco at Ostend, 115; author of Ostend Manifesto, 115-116; sure of victory in 1856, 119; testifies to friendship for Slidell, 120; attitude on Kansas-Nebraska issue, 122; needs Slidell's advice, 131; election purchased (foot-note), 135; presence in Washington desirable, 138; supports Cuban purchase bill, 154; testifies to admiration for Slidell, 159; not accused of imbecility by Slidell, 175-176; removal of Commandant at West Point, 177-178; parts company with Slidell, 179-180.
- Calhoun, John C., advocate of Texan annexation, 51; conference with Polk, 70-71; desired Mexican mission for himself, 78; views on national improvements, 130.
- California, offer to purchase it from Mexico, 58.
- Cameron, Simon, favors perpetual franchise for Washington street railway, 161.
- Campbell, James, Postmaster-General under Pierce, 103.
- Cass, Lewis, respected by Slidell, 79; wins part of Louisiana vote in 1848, 80; cannot be candidate in 1852, 82; popular with best elements in party, 90; favors Slidell for cabinet position, 96; opposes Douglas nomination, 1856, 120; objects to recall of troops from Kansas, 132; ideal nominee for Secretary of State, 140.
- Charleston Convention, 162-164.



- Cincinnati Convention, 122-124.
- Clay, Henry, an unobjectionable Whig, 81.
- Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, disliked by Slidell, 138.
- Cobb, Howell, political letter from Slidell, 89; lukewarm supporter of Buchanan, 91; letter from Robert M. McLane, 139; safer than Walker for the State Department, 140.
- Compromise of 1850, a temporary solution, 83.
- Cotton Loan of 1863, preliminary overtures, 204; proposed by the Erlangers, 205; terms severe, 206; occupies Slidell in 1863, 207; definitely arranged, 208; the terms, 208-209; finances ship-building, 210; bonds decline, 211; rumors of a second loan, 213; its probable details, 214.
- Conner, Commodore, to inform Slidell of Mexican developments, 76.
- Crosby, Fortunatus, suspected as a spy, 219.
- Cuba, likely to be "Africanized," 108; a dominant interest with Slidell, 112; slight prospect of acquirement under Pierce, 115; still an objective in 1857-1858, 143; too late to interfere, 146; the \$30,000,000 Purchase Bill, 152; ever near the heart of Slidell, 160.
- Cushing, General Caleb, desirable editor for a Buchanan newspaper? 87.
- Dana, Richard Henry, befriends the brother of Slidell, 22; ideas upon the Trent Affair, 183.
- Davis, Jefferson, aids appointment of Buchanan to London mission, 100; desires to return to the Senate, 107; advises Pierce on Cuban policy, 111; plans to remove troops from Kansas, 131-132; speaks at Selma, Alabama, 173; names Slidell to diplomatic post, 180; Peace rumors, 224.
- Disraeli, Benjamin, on Russell-Seward agreement, 190; friendly but not helpful to the South, 197.
- Disunion, a possibility, 134; desirable under certain contingencies, 135-136; becomes more imminent, 144-145.
- Dodd, Professor William E., cited for statement that Slidell destroyed his papers, 2.
- Douglas, Stephen A., interested in railroads, 29; controls much predatory wealth, 87; popular with worst elements in party, 90; disastrous to nominate in 1852, 93; preliminary conversations as to Missouri Compromise repeal, 103; advises Pierce on Cuban policy, 111; opposed by Cass in 1856, 120; maneuvering at Cincinnati, 123; entitled to a letter from Buchanan, 132; must be denied the patronage, 139; passage at arms with Slidell, 147; slandered as to treatment of his slaves, 149; wins support of Belmont, 159; arrogance at Charleston, 163; attacked in Campaign of 1860, 171; befriended by Irish and Germans, 174; once more regarded kindly by Slidell, 235.
- Drouyn de Lhuys, M., succeeds Thouvenel, 205; Southern sympathies, 219; insincere statements, 220; polite nothings, 223.

- Everett, Edward, pleases Slidell by an able state paper, 109.
- Eustis, George, defeats Slidell in a law case, 10.
- Eustis, George, Jr., Secretary of Legation, 181, 226.
- Filibustering, should be legalized, 143.
- Floyd, John B., dismissed from War portfolio, 176; upheld by Slidell, 177.
- Fould, M., French minister of finance, 188.
- Frémont, John P., election would disrupt the Union, 135-136.
- Garibaldi, Giuseppe, distracts attention from the South, 201; an obstacle to Southern plans, 203; mentioned, 210.
- Gettysburg, Battle of, turning point in diplomacy as well as war, 217.
- Giddings, Joshua, violently attacked in House of Representatives, 40-41.
- Grant, Ulysses S., a potential dictator, 226.
- Grow, Galusha A., anecdote on Missouri-Compromise repeal, 103.
- Grund, Francis, German leader in the Northwest, 133-134; friend of Brainard and Slidell, 149.
- Halstead, Murat, describes Slidell at Charleston, 162-164.
- Harris, Townsend, treaty with Siam, 146.
- Houmas Frauds, mentioned, 157; Slidell's defense, 164-167; newspaper comment (foot-notes), 164-165.
- Hunkers and Barnburners, mistaken attitude of Pierce, 106.
- Internal Improvements, views of Slidell, 129.
- Isolation, Slidell an isolationist, as witness Persian mission, 143.
- Jackson, Andrew, appoints Slidell to office in New Orleans, 11; mistrusts Slidell, 12; fined by Judge Hall in 1815, 25.
- Johnson, Andrew, possibility of drunken outbreaks, 226; no reply to petition of Slidell, 230.
- Kansas, Pierce likely to prolong its troubles, 131.
- Kansas-Nebraska Bill, 103, 144.
- King, Preston, anti-duelling resolution, 42.
- Kossuth, Louis, not admired by Slidell, 93.
- Law, George, ocean mail contractor, 87.
- Law of Nations, numerous authorities cited, 145-146.
- Leopold I of Belgium, friendly to the South, 206; influence at London unavailing, 208.
- Lincoln, Abraham, nominated for President, 169; previous record colorless, 170; determined to win the war, 208; assassination not discussed, 226.
- Lyons, Lord, British minister at Washington, 191; friendly to Slidell at Paris, 232-233.
- Mackenzie, Alexander Slidell, courtmartialled for execution of Midshipman Philip Spencer, 20; loyal to his brother, 74.
- McClellan, Gen. George B., Peninsular Campaign, 193; its failure, 198; supposed plans, 203.

- Mann, Colonel Ambrose Dudley, on publication of Papal correspondence, 222-223; possibility for pardon, 228.
- Marcy, William L., a power in New York, 85; must be conciliated, 87; master of New York in 1852, 88; campaign letter from lieutenant, 91; perhaps a second choice in 1852, 93; receives Buchanan's letter of condolence, 94; Secretary of State for Pierce, 96; on simplicity in diplomatic costume, 106; strained relations with Slidell, 112; willing to be nominated President, 116; opposed by Slidell, 117; break with Soule, 117; administration of State Department subjected to attack, 143.
- Maritime Law, American interpretation unlike European, 10.
- Mason, James Murray, less capable than Slidell, 180; Confederate Commissioner at London, 187; agrees with colleague, 195; urges recognition of the South, 200; bolsters price of cotton bonds, 212; skeptical as to peace rumors, 225; balance of his salary paid, 227; post-bellum situation, 227-228; returns to Virginia, 1869, 231.
- Maury, Captain, Confederate agent at St. Petersburg, 206; supervises ship-building, 210.
- Maximilian, Emperor, avoids granting interview to Slidell, 220.
- Mercier, Doctor, brother-in-law of Soule, 99.
- Mercier, M., sent to Richmond by Napoleon III, 192; report not satisfactory, 193; instructions mildly worded, 207-208.
- Mexico, Slidell the logical appointee for a mission, 45; projected compensation for territories purchased, 56; instability of governments, 66; stupidity of plain people defeats the mission of Slidell, 69; final failure of the mission, 70; results of mission summarized, 72-73.
- Morny, Duc de, offers opportunity to Slidell, 202.
- Napoleon III, to be reconciled to American designs on Cuba, 158; believed sympathetic towards the South, 188; foreign policy depends on England's, 189; overtures to England, 189-190; sends Mercier to Richmond, 192; friendliness reiterated, 193; friendship undoubted, 198; grants Slidell an interview, 198; acts in cabinet crisis, 205; policy unchanged, 215-216; very cordial to Slidell, 218; orders are not executed, 222; grants another interview, 224; downfall of the Second Empire, 234.
- Neutrality Laws, President should have authority to suspend them, 146.
- Nicaragua, political jobbery in the transit route, 155.
- Nichols, Dr. Roy F., indebtedness to Dr. Nichols for Slidell letter, 124.
- Oregon, a factor in Mexican calculations, 63.
- Ostend Manifesto, 103; 111; 117; Slidell a factor, 107.
- Palmerston, Lord, not to be counted on for South, 189; declarations as to French and British policy, 193; considered friendly to the South, 195; not trusted by Slidell, 197;

- strength in Parliament, 198; 206; 216; 217; 220; 223; reported confident of South's success, 219.
- Papacy, friendly to the South, 222-223.
- Paris Mission, Slidell is willing to accept it, 158.
- Paulding, Commodore Hiram, seizure of William Walker, 143; technically within the law of nations, 145-146.
- Peace, its coming a surprise, 223-224.
- Peña y Peña, relations with Slidell, 60-61.
- Perry, Commodore Matthew C., marries Slidell's sister, 5; gifts to Mrs. Slidell, 15; entertains Slidell at Tarrytown, 80; member of Naval Retiring Board, 125.
- Persia, Slidell opposes sending her a mission, 143.
- Persigny, Comte de, French minister of the interior, 187; forecasts recognition, 192; forecasts intervention, 198; writes encouragingly, 200; over-sanguine temperament, 201; tells Slidell of Mercier's instructions, 207.
- Pierce, Franklin, ignores Buchanan for the State Department, 97; failure of administration is forecast, 98; suffers from weakness in his cabinet, 106-107; evasiveness respecting Cuba, 111; disregarded by his party leaders, 116; opposed by Slidell, 117; breaks faith with Slidell, 118; generally disliked by senators, 119; the real competitor of Buchanan, 1856, 121; vetoes bill for internal improvements, 129; desires defeat of Buchanan at the polls, 131.
- Plaquemine Frauds, dishonest voting in 1844, 39; counter-charges by Slidell, 40; detected by honest men, 157.
- Poland, insurrection hampers Southern interests, 210.
- Polk, James K., reasons for peaceful policy toward Mexico, 50; includes settlement of claims as a Mexican objective, 52; precautions to insure Slidell's reception, 55; sincere desire for California, 57; corresponds with Santa Anna, 68; takes Calhoun into his confidence, 70; defends Slidell's conduct of his mission, 71.
- Pratt, Governor Thomas George, Slidell's nominee for Collector of the Port of Baltimore, 142.
- Pruyn, John N. L., letter to Marcy on prospects of 1852, 91.
- Public Improvements, Slidell's consistent attitude, 148.
- Rhett, Robert Barnwell, Slidell's disapproval, 89; a fire-eater, 137.
- Rogers, Rear Admiral Raymond, brother-in-law of Slidell, 236.
- Russell, Earl, not likely to aid the South, 189; refuses to negotiate informally, 190; in Slidell's view an obstacle to the South, 195; refuses recognition, 201; still opposed to recognition, 217; Slidell's *bête noir*, 224.
- Secret Service Fund, swelled by 500 pounds, 221.
- Seward, William H., attracts a certain type of Whig, 96; nomination preferred to that

- of Lincoln, 170; diplomacy in Trent Affair, 182; supposed agreement with Russell on blockade, 191; reputed friendly to an armistice, 208.
- Slavery, its manifest destiny, 82.
- Slidell, Alfred, correspondence with the author, 3; enters bond business in New York, 233.
- Slidell, Jane, marries Lieutenant Matthew C. Perry, 5-6.
- Slidell, John, destroys biographical material, 2; date of birth, 5; graduates from Columbia College, 6; goes to New Orleans, 8; law practice before Supreme Court of State, 9; seeks a seat in Congress, 10; U. S. District Attorney at New Orleans, 11; marries Mathilde Deslonde, 13; disposition described by daughter, 14; fails of Senate but recovers standing with Van Buren, 15; political letter to Van Buren, 16-18; enters 28th Congress, 24; warns Van Buren against Abolition friends, 27; introduces resolution on judiciary, 28-29; interested in railroads, 29; tariff speech, 31-37; swings Louisiana for Polk, 1844, 37; natural choice for mission to Mexico, 38; countercharges in Plaquemine frauds, 40; participates in attack on Giddings, 40-41; opposes calculating Congressional mileage by direct mail route, 42; vote on anti-duelling resolution, 42; favors new State of East Florida, 42; interest in the navy, 43; on new furniture for the White House, 43; favors direct election of President, 44; welcomes mission to Mexico, 45; inherent obstacles to mission, 59; departs for Mexico, 60; quits Mexican capital, 62; prospect of successful mission, 65; mission enters on auxiliary phase, 66; returns from Mexico, 70-71; seeks proof of Jackson's approbation of Mackenzie, 75; willing to return to Mexico, 75; plans to make Buchanan President, 77; Slidell's own ambition is the Senate, 77-78; fails in 1848 to reach his goal, 79; refuses to cast Louisiana ballot, 1848, 80; complains of failure of Buchanan to win Marcy, 88; opposes fire-eaters, 89; grief at failure of Buchanan's nomination, 93-94; considers temperance legislation tyranny, 95; mentioned for Pierce's cabinet, 96; controls Louisiana against Soulé, 98; asserts his claim to Louisiana patronage, 98; describes the nullity of Soulé, 99; offered mission to Central America, 101; attains to seat in Senate, 102; interested in the Kansas struggle, 103; interests as a senator, 104; advocates a naval station at New Orleans, 104; friendly to the navy, 104; opposes secrecy in the Senate, 105; agitates for Cuban acquisition, 108; hostile to Great Britain *in re* Cuba, 108; speech on Cuban annexation, 108-110; advises Pierce on Cuban policy, 111; defends State sovereignty, 113; opposes alien ownership of land, 113; wants economy in mail service, 114; absolves Buchanan in Ostend fiasco,

115; returns to Senate, 115; opposes Pierce and Marcy, 117; accuses Pierce of breach of faith, 118; fears breakup of the Union, 118; willing for Douglas to seek nomination, 121; advises Buchanan on political tactics, 122; leader of the Buchanan forces, 123; opposes extending patents, 125; attitude towards Sumner, 126-128; wishes abrogation of Anglo-American treaty of 1842, 128; views on internal improvements, 129-131; a Union man in 1856, 136; disapproves the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, 138; promises to write Buchanan on appointments, 139; views on leading politicians, 140; recommends Toucey to Buchanan, 141; controls Louisiana patronage, 142; evens scores with Marcy, 143; opposes sending mission to Persia, 143; upholds the Lecompton Constitution, 144; speech on seizure of William Walker, 145-146; watch-dog of the Treasury, 146; tilt with Douglas, 147; opposes national improvements, 148; underhand assault on Douglas's reputation, 149-152; is offered mission to Paris, 152; recommends Benjamin to mission at Madrid, 152; introduces Cuban purchase bill, 152; presents petition of New Yorkers on public lands, 153; accused of pandering to Wall Street, 155; the nick-name "Houmas", 156; patronage of ruffians asserted, 156; alleged propensity for gambling, 157; defended by Benjamin on "Houmas" charge, 157; willing to accept the Paris mis-

sion, 158; blamed for failure of Belmont to secure mission at Madrid, 159; favors temporary street car franchise in Washington, 160-161; pictured by Murat Halstead, 162-164; disapproves of added bounties to naval officers for captured slavers, 164; defense against the "Houmas" charges, 164-167; (foot-note) adept at machine politics, 167-168; less a power in 1860 than in 1856, 169; comments on Lincoln's nomination, 169-170; supports Breckinridge and Lane, 170-172; popularity with young men, 171; prospect of Secession in Louisiana, 174; endeavors to preserve commerce with the Upper Mississippi, 175; denies accusing Buchanan of imbecility, 175-176; questions President on Floyd's dismissal, 176; protests removal of Commandant at West Point, 177; farewell to Senate, 178; slow to approve Secession, 178-179; a heavy tax-payer (foot-note), 179; parts company with Buchanan, 179-180; logical choice for a diplomatic post, 180; audience with M. Fould, 188; hopes Napoleon may act alone, 192; pessimistic as to outcome of the mission, 194; forecasts the South's approval of French plans in Mexico, 195; interview with Napoleon, III, 198-199; discouraged by Earl Russell's tactics, 200-201; mistrusts Persigny's over-sanguine temperament, 201; scorns to negotiate with Seward, 202; feels that 1862 is critical, 203; estimate of first



- year of the mission, 206-207; active in ship-building, 210; sound views upon finance, 211; arrangements to violate British neutrality, 212-213; no confidence in British agent of the cotton loan, 213; audience with Napoleon III, 215; unjustified anticipations, 216; pride in family's position in society, 218; attempts to ascertain Lord Palmerston's intentions, 219-220; failure to interview Maximilian, 220-221; rumors of impending peace, 223-224; another interview with Napoleon III, 224; grief at Lee's surrender, 225-226; no comment on Lincoln's assassination, 226, 235; obliged to economize, 226-227; balance of his salary paid, 227; difficulties of post bellum situation, 227-228; seeks permission to visit New Orleans, 229-230; advice to Confederates in Europe, 230; unreconstructed, 230-231; Paris his home, 231; visits Napoleon III in exile, 235; deep attachment for Napoleon III, 236; pathetic letter to Admiral Rogers, 236-237; dies at Cowes, England, 1871, 237; author's estimate of John Slidell, 238-239.
- Slidell, Mrs. John, (née Mathilde Deslonde), her marriage, 13; an artist, 14; gifts from Commodore Perry, 15; a Creole, 30; shares husband's confidence as to Mexican mission, 53; a good wife, 117; attends receptions of Eugénie, 218; likes Parisian life, 231; her death, 234; followed shortly by her husband's, 236.
- Slidell, Julia, wife of Rear Admiral Raymond Rogers, 236.
- Slidell, Marie Rosine (Comtesse de St. Roman), acknowledgment of author's obligations, 4; describes her father's disposition, 14; describes her mother, 15; account of mutiny on the Somers and court-martial of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, 20-22; family friendship for the French legation (foot-note), 152; French social life in the 1860's, 218; on post bellum prosperity of the family, 232; accompanies Slidell on visit to Imperial exiles, 235.
- Soulé, Pierre, receives Slidell's vote for senator, 1848, 79; disturbing factor in Louisiana politics, 84; supports Stephen A. Douglas, 90; early leader in Secession, 97; less powerful in Louisiana than Slidell, 98; negligible in Louisiana politics, 99; goes to Spain as minister, 102; correspondence on the Ostend Manifesto, 114; fails as minister to Spain, 117; hostility is not to be despised, 132; death grapple with Slidell for Louisiana, 155; attempts to organize a new party, 157-158; no longer powerful in Louisiana, 173.
- Spain, seeks international agreement for Cuban guarantees, 109; possibility of intervention in Mexico, 146.
- Spencer, Philip (Midshipman), pirate, protected by high naval officers, 22.
- States' Rights, sincerity of Slidell's views, 112.
- Sumner, Charles, befriends the bother of Slidell, 22; assault



- is mentioned, 30; assault described, 125-128; (foot-note) attacks Slidell in the *Atlantic Monthly*, 180; acts to avert war after Trent affair, 182; bitter attack on Slidell and Mason, 184-185.
- Tariff, speech by Slidell, 31-37
- Tehuantepec, objective in a Slidell-Benjamin-Wall Street scheme, 155.
- Temperance Legislation, viewed as tyranny, 95.
- Texas, duties on cotton imports, 25.
- Thouvenel, M., French foreign minister, 187; attitude toward Slidell, 192; not hostile, but not friendly, 193; discourages demand for recognition, 200; admits the possibility of intervention, 204.
- Toombs, Robert, anticipates election of Buchanan, 1856, 134.
- Trent Affair, narrative, 181-184; France supported England, 199.
- Trist, Nicholas P., (foot-note) attends to business matters for Slidell, 46; (foot-note) prevents seizure of all of northern Mexico, 64.
- Toucey, Isaac, recommended by Slidell, 141.
- Van Buren, Martin, mistrusts Slidell, 11; recovers confidence in Slidell, 15; pleased with Slidell's Jackson speech, 26; warned against New York associates, 27; termination of Slidell alliance, 28.
- Queen Victoria, believed friendly toward the South, 206; views no longer of importance, 222.
- Walker, Robert J., favors Texan annexation, 49; defends it against John Quincy Adams, 51; not fully trusted by Slidell, 86; likes Buchanan, despises Benton, 133; opposed for State Department by numerous States; too dangerous a man, 139-140; course in Kansas disapproved by South, 142.
- Walker, William, seizure disapproved, 143; seizure legal but unfortunate, 146.
- Washington, D. C., permanent surrender of its streets opposed, 160.
- Whig Party, moribund in 1852, 95; "better elements" turn Democratic, 118.
- Wilkes, Captain Charles, action in the Trent Affair, 181-182.
- Wilmot Proviso, a factor in Louisiana politics, 79; insufficient provocation for rupturing the Union, 83-84.
- Winthrop, Robert C., courteous to Slidell, a captive, 183.
- Yancey, William L., a dangerous politician, 89.





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